

ANC

OTHER WORLDS

SCIENCE STORIES

January 1950 35c

SONS of the SERPENT

by WES AMHERST



THIS TIME . . . by ROG PHILLIPS

TO GIVE THEM WELCOME by MELVA ROGERS

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EDITORIAL

WITH this second issue of **OTHER WORLDS** we are in the science fiction field with both feet. And with this second issue, we have a new introduction to make. We want you to meet our new owner and publisher, Ray Palmer, who resigned his post as editor of the Ziff-Davis magazines. *Amazing Stories* and *Fantastic Adventures* to add his talent to our organization. Ray has also become the new owner of **FATE**, our older and very successful sister magazine. From now on, the editorial "we" will be yours truly, Robert N. Webster, and Ray Palmer.

FIRST, WE WANT to congratulate the Cincinnati science fiction fans for engineering the greatest World Science Fiction Convention in the history of the Convention. We attended the convention, that is, the Ray Palmer half of us, and we had a wonderful time. Now, let's make that Portland convention even bigger and better!

NEXT, WE WANT TO thank the readers of the first issue of **OTHER WORLDS** for their many letters telling us what they thought of the first issue and what they wanted to see in future issues. Those letters have been some of the best we've seen in twelve years of science fiction editing, and written with the sort of constructive suggestion that can't fail to build our magazine up to the standard we promised in our first issue.

THIS ISSUE HAS several stories in it we want to comment on. For instance, *The Fatal Word* by Gustavus Meyrink. This is fiction, in the first place, so don't go completely overboard for what the author says—but in a way, it is typical of some of the mysterious "other world" atmosphere of Tibet. After all, it is a region which has literally been another world to the rest of civilization for a long time. We present this story in answer to the plea from some of our readers for short-stories and for fantasy. This is both, and we hope you'll like it, even if it is "off-trail." You'll find, in the future, that **OTHER WORLDS** really lives up to its

title, and will venture into any world imaginable.

THE OTHER STORY in this issue that should be given a few editorial words in *Descent From Mera*, by Millen Cooke. This one is definitely a fantasy, although it's chock-full of what the science-fictioneer would call gadgets. We say it's fantasy, because it's bound to strike some hot fire from one of the "taboo" designations usually included by editors in their instructions to writers as to what subjects not to write about. Whether it is taboo or not (we won't be bound by any such restrictions) it is other world, and as such we present it, let the chips fall where they may. We think it is a fascinating fantasy, and, like such famous fantasies as *Lost Horizon* and *Brave New World*, it dares to shock the superstitious, the dogmatic and perhaps even the reverent; which places it in rather esteemed company. But don't compliment us on our "guts" in publishing this one—we liked it for **OTHER WORLDS** and we thought our readers would like it. At least, we won't presume to keep anything from you, just because of a personal opinion. An editor is his readers' editor, not an editor's editor.

AND OH SAY, Sam Merwin, you were wrong in rejecting *The Miracle Of Elmer Wilde*. It was the favorite story in the first issue of **OTHER WORLDS**. More, it was rated as being one of the better stories of the year. Perhaps this was to be expected, since its author was Rog Phillips, who is the hottest thing in science fiction right now. He's on the stands with a new pocket book called *Time Trap*, which is the first time any pocket book publisher has presented an original novel for the first time in that medium. Always, before science fiction pocket books have been reprints. Hope you picked that story up—it was a darn good one. And you can still get it, if we're not mistaken. Any pocket book newsstand would have it.

SPEAKING OF Rog Phillips, he's back again this issue with *This Time . . .* which is, quite frankly, rather out of his

usual field. You may not even like it. In it, Rog depicts the possibility that there are other worlds in Time that we can visit—by the simple expedient of dying . . . or, as in this story, by being shocked with high voltage electricity, and driven out of our bodies, leaving only gibbering idiots. After all, where does reason go, during insanity? This is a startling little story, and we think it deserves to be in **OTHER WORLDS** because it could go nowhere else. The science in it is good, practical, and factual. It's no harebrained mess of scientific mumbo-jumbo, and for that reason, we may be wrong about you not liking it. Anyway, we won't summarily make the decision for you. In cases like this, it's up to you to determine future policy. Your letters will do it.

TIME TRAVEL stories have always been popular, and we present an unusual one in this issue, called *Sons Of The Serpent* by Wes Amherst. We've always liked the type of character the author has built up here in the villain, Dayn. Sure, he's a villain, but no matter, you get to like him, or if not that, at least respect him. We think this one's adventure, and much of it pretty wild and woolly. Anyway, you can't say it stands still.

IF IT ISN'T heresy, the editors would like to pick *To Give Them Welcome* by Melva Rogers as the best story in this issue. Maybe it's just because we like babies, but maybe it's because this one's just about the most solidly based science fiction story in the issue. We're sure you'll like it too.

HOWARD BROWNE, who took over Ray Palmer's job at *Amazing Stories* and *Fantastic Adventures*, had coffee with us the other day, and outlined some of his plans for the future. We know he'll plug his magazines pretty well himself, but maybe we can beat him to it, and let you know some of the things he has in store for you. First, he's called those old friends of yours, William P. McGivern, Robert Moore Williams, Dwight V. Swain (man, what a writer!) and Don Wilcox into conference and put them to work on what will better even the heyday of *Amazing Stories*, the days B. S. (before Shaver). Well, we remember Howard's own stories, *Warrior Of The Dawn* and so on, which were a part of that heyday, and we can well believe that watching

Mr. Browne at work will be very interesting indeed. After all, Mr. Browne, we edited *Amazing* in them thar heydays, and we're right pleased at the compliment. Mr. Browne, if you improve over those days, you can expect us to be right on your heels with even better! Wanna fight it out on the newsstands, big boy? Okay, it's a deal.

AND NOW, LET'S get personal. We hereby invite Ray Bradbury, L. Sprague de Camp, John W. Campbell, Jr. (oops, he's an editor, but allasame, we like his stories), Theodore Sturgeon, Jack Williamson, Lester Del Rey, A. E. Van Vogt—in fact, any writer who thinks he can write a story which is so unusual most editors wouldn't dare to publish it—to let us see same.

MAYBE WE OUGHT to tell you readers something of our plans for the future? Well, for one thing we are not publishing **OTHER WORLDS** every other month because we want to, but because we must. And the reason is that we're still midgets compared to the giant publishing houses. But we will put out our magazine on a monthly schedule as soon as our growth warrants it. Next, we intend to secure illustrators from among the ranks of the best in science fiction. As a starter, you'll note that Rod Ruth and Bill Terry have added their talents to those of Malcolm Smith for this issue. The cover, by Malcolm Smith, is one we think is far different from his initial cover for **OTHER WORLDS**, and indicative of the swift change of pace we intend to maintain. Lastly, we are beginning to read manuscripts which show the writers of America have taken note of us, and welcome us as a new market ready and willing to take on the original, startling and off-trail story.

WE THINK YOU'LL notice some changes in **OTHER WORLDS** over the first issue, and we predict that by our sixth issue you'll find the changes so vast as to be almost unrelated to our feeble beginnings. It's all a matter of education—of our writers, illustrators and editors. We're depending on experience to teach us what to do—and we are trying everything with the conviction that even mistakes will show us our future pathway. So, here's to that future!—Robert N. Webster.



SONS OF THE SERPENT

By WES AMHERST

THE police of our largest city are still hunting me, because of Henry Dayn's crime. But, although both Henry Dayn and myself are people who stand out from a crowd like a viper stands out from a bunch of garter snakes, the police will never even be able to arrest either of us. My name is well known, my tall figure one impossible to mistake. My name is Donald Fisher, and at the time of the murder, the name and the

photograph were in every newspaper in the country.

I stand several inches above average height, have wide and bony shoulders, my hands are too big and dangle out of my sleeves on powerful arms that seem too long. My black hair is usually tangled, and I always forget my hat somewhere. You wouldn't think I could hide from police anywhere, when they were equipped with a photograph, had me in custody, finger-



A bolt of liquid energy lashed out and struck the crystal, shattering it into a thousand fragments.

Henry Dayn bore the bloodstain of the Serpent People in his veins, and because of it, sought to bridge Time and bring down on modern man the ancient Race that perished in a great cataclysm

printed, and branded a murderer. But I managed it, without even a hat to hide my head under.

Henry Dayn, too, was a thing you would have thought it impossible to conceal. He wasn't even a man!

Hank, as we called him when we were kids (though I never heard him called anything but Mr. Dayn in later life), stood out from the rest of humanity all right. An

eagle is not a hawk, a timber wolf is not a coyote, and a viper is possessed of certain distinctive characteristics separating it from reptiles lacking venom.

Whatever peculiar combination of hereditary accidents produced Henry Dayn, he was one "man" possessed of features which made him fit the word "exceptional" so well as not to be of the same species.

A line of Percherons can throw an Arabian of pure blood, I have read, if there were Arabians somewhere in their lineage. Such a throwback to a type long-extinct is what Henry Dayn really was.

After we were grown, and our paths crossed again, I tried for a long time to fit his peculiarities to some latent memory.

Long ago, when men first began their endless wars, the mighty powers chained in the cities of Atlantis and of Mu were unleashed against the Serpent People. Some legends give the Serpent People the greater antiquity, say that they brought men from the stupidity of the ape, set his feet on the ladder to greatness.

Some legends attribute the sinking of Atlantis to the last vengeful efforts of the Serpent People, as they succeeded in carrying the glory of Atlantis with them into limbo.

But some survived, and some with Serpent blood survived among those survivors, it was inevitable that eventually one full-blooded throwback would be born again.

Since knowing *him*, I have often wondered if Attila, Genghis Khan, Hohenzollern and Hitler might not have inherited their peculiar ability to get men to do what they wanted even though it meant their lives from that serpentine hypnotic power that was theirs above all other races.

That ancient Serpent brain alive again on Earth, working out its own alien life-pattern to the destruction of our own!

Hank was hairless. His eyes,

sleepy and nearly lidless, were apt to film over at times when he wished to hide that alien glitter—a film itself more alien to man than evil is alien. In Henry Dayn all this was not obvious, but I was forced to endure association with him for a long period.

He had the eyes of a snake, a greyish skin, stretched smooth over a bone structure like no other alive on Earth today. Too far from human to be really man, he was yet MAN, born of woman. A kind of man long unknown on our old Earth. But has it been so very long, in truth, since the Serpent legions sent their fiery rain out upon Atlantis? I know, *now*, and our pedantic authorities are very wrong about that past they prate of.

In other respects he would pass casual observation; as a simulacrum passes for the real thing, only to be seen as a mere scarecrow when bumped against.

To me, it was always an evidence of the mind-blindness of the human race that Henry Dayn could pass among men without a shrinking and a shrieking going before him and behind him. If they had known, been able to see completely, that venomous murderous ability and inherent intent toward erasing the glory that we hide with the words "modern man," a mere shriek would hardly have been sufficient to convey that reality.

But let that pass. Such insight came to me later. At first I was blind as the rest, for Henry Dayn, the man-serpent, was so far beyond the average man's concepts

as to be unacceptable except as what we term "monstrous." There are many such words behind which men hide what they do not wish to see.

Still, Hank was no horror, after familiarity had bred acceptance of himself and his meaning among the paths that meaning takes toward creation. He was a form of life, I suppose, and his working out of his inborn patterns of behavior, his viper-nest building, his attempts to foster the growth of others of his kind, to create about him a world of beings and conditions suitable and natural to him, was inborn instinct. We accept insect instincts, animal instincts, bird instincts. In Henry Dayn, the reptilian instinct was bound to work out its inborn pattern. He was really a normal creature, as normalcy goes on this wild planet.

He was the emergence of a long dormant ancestral strain upon the scene of man-life. His impact, his complete divergence from what we accept as man's goal, was for me an enlightenment as to the nature of life, an insight into the extreme longevity of character. Even though their works perish, yet they will live on even in the flesh of an alien species, to emerge once more, complete and ready down to the last door-button—but let that pass; you do not know from observation what instinct and behavior really are. I hope you do not learn it as I did, that all of you will not live to see the success of Dayn's sort of conquest.

I knew him as you know the kid in the next block. You see him on the way to school, you meet him

at the YMCA, maybe you fight him in the school yard a couple of times. But you never really run together. Hank's people were well-to-do, mine were working class.

Later, after I had left the old home town and gone to work in the city, I ran into him. We struck up a speaking acquaintance on the strength of "the old home town." Would to God I had followed my own instinct, that inner shrieking that said: "Ignore him, don't speak, pass by!"

They say that birds, some kinds of birds, cannot evade the hypnotic glitter in the eyes of snakes, but will sit and await the devouring.

I knew. Deep inside me, I knew. But I talked to him; and Henry Dayn could talk. He spoke of his work—electrical engineering research, he called it. He spoke of his pleasures, and little by little fascinated my mind with the depth and the richness of experience all beyond my reach. Inextricably he wove about me a net of fascination as glittering and strong as any web ever woven to hold a victim.

It was only a few nights later he introduced me to Dorothy. A small blonde creature, she was his stenographer and secretary. I was jealous as I wondered if she were one of those office wives, wrapped up in her boss.

Dorothy Wayne had very capable hands, a straight efficient-looking back, a brisk business-like manner. But the rest of her was as adorable as any bundle ever created for man's joy by the God-hand that made Eve. I saw her regularly after that, nor did I

think anything of the fact that Dayn seemed to want to promote our friendship.

I saw her at least twice a week, taking her to shows, a dance or two, to supper—and then she called me on the phone.

It was eleven at night. I was just turning out the lamp over my desk full of blueprints when the phone rang.

"Mr. Fisher? Oh, Donald, I'm so glad I could reach you!" It was Dorothy's voice, and she sounded a little frightened and embarrassed, a little too intent on making an impression. I sensed that approach to a request for something she was afraid would cost too much that women inevitably make.

"Could you possibly come here for me? I don't know how to tell you. I'm frightened, and I'm not sure there is a reason, but I'll tell you and see what you think."

I was pleased, flattered, for I looked up to Dorothy, who was of a quick and capable mind above my own in handling the situations and people of the big city life. My own inept and untutored ways had got me no further than an especially low-paying job in a drafting office, where I worked out other people's plans for success. I felt I was stuck there for life.

I said: "Dorothy, I'd be glad to. It's been a dull evening, working on some outside drafting to pick up extra money. I'll be glad to get out in the air. I'll be right there."

It was a place called the Lorelei, a nightery of the more expensive kind I'd never entered. I knew it

as the place the more affluent young bloods of the city frequented, neither notorious nor especially respectable.

She was standing just outside the doorway, and the uniformed doorman was answering her question; probably she was asking if I had arrived. She was dressed in an evening gown, some dark blue thing with an almost unnoticeable white flower pattern, and her bright hair in the light of the garish doorway was the one attractive spot in an otherwise, to me, rather gloomy nightscape. She was a darling, I smiled to myself, pretending to be frightened to get me out of the stupid rut and to her side.

I parked and hurried toward her, calling her name inaudibly, under my breath, realizing with every step that I had been a fool not to have shown her every attention before this. She was so darn beautiful!

She turned and saw me. She took several steps toward me. There were a number of figures about the doorway. The doorman turned his back for a second to answer someone. A shot rang out.

Dorothy Wayne stopped, stood high on her toes for an instant, swaying as if about to begin some terrible dance of the depiction of complete pain . . .

Then she dropped to the pavement at my feet!

There was a round red hole spreading swiftly a glistening outpouring of crimson. Also there was a gun, lying right beside her. I felt a strange compulsion, bent, picked up the gun. It was only

then that the other figures seemed to come to life, began to crowd around me, staring at me accusingly. I stood, stupidly waiting . . .

I might just as well have killed her, for all the difference the actual circumstances of the murder made. It was my first experience with Henry Dayn's unusual powers over the perceptions and actions of ordinary humans. If ever a jury had conviction in its eyes, that one did.

No use my saying that Dayn had been one of the figures in the shadows, close enough to have done the killing himself. That no one but him had actually seen me fire the shot, according to the testimony. That no one but him could possibly have any reason to want her dead, that that reason might be found if his affairs were investigated. I thought all these things out in my own head, found myself unable to say them!

There were no other eye-witnesses, really. I looked at the pretty peach-bloom fuzz on the rosy cheek of the kid lawyer my seventy bucks had hired. Then I looked at the eagle-sharp eye of the needle-nosed prosecutor.

I couldn't blame anyone. How were they to know their eye-witness was a liar of the first magnitude?

I had been beside the body, I had the gun in my hand, and they had not noticed me until after I got in that position. Apparently no one had even seen me up to the time they all pointed me out as the murderer. And only some diabolical mental finagling could

have made them so blind.

They didn't need any more evidence. A dozen people who were present swore "they didn't see how it could have been anyone but Donald Fisher."

Nothing helped. As that jury filed back in after a slim half hour, I knew it was now or never. Even the cops knew it, and I could see one of them take the cuffs off his belt and examine them reflectively. In just about ten minutes by the clock, he was going to put that pair of cuffs on me. And it would be only a few weeks after that I would sit down for the last time on a very hot chair.

From where I sat I could see into the little private chamber of the judge. He had left the door ajar for the benefit of the slight breeze. Beyond it I could see the open window, an angle of the building wall outside, and running down that wall angle, a nice square drain pipe. It looked awfully good, that drain pipe. Too good to resist!

The foreman stood up, mopped his thin red face with a white handkerchief, cleared his throat. Everybody was watching him, waiting to hear a man's living declared illegal and to be brought to an end. My life!

I don't know why I even tried; certainly I had no idea it was possible.

I was halfway across the big space in front of the judge's high black bar before anyone even noticed me.

By that time I was going full

tilt, and as the cop rose from his seat by the little gate into the judge's sanctum, I hit him with my shoulder, caromed off, brought up against the wall as the policeman fell over his own chair and went down. I was spinning as I hit the wall and still running. I bounced off, shoving myself with my hands. As I went through the door into the judge's private little rest room, something made me kick it shut and it felt good to hear it click shut right in somebody's big fat face as they hit it.

I put one foot on the window sill and took off like a bird. I fell ten feet while I sailed across six toward that suddenly fragile-looking drain pipe. My hands gripped it, checked my fall, burned hot on the metal. Little flakes of green paint flew up into my face in a sudden shower as my gripping hands slid and slid. Down and down . . . somehow the pipe was endless!

I hit the ground and went down on all fours, my feet sinking deep in the sod. But I didn't stop. Even as a gun cracked above, I was running from that crouching start, sprinting hard around the protective building corner of gray stone.

Then I saw him—the dumb cop who had made the pinch!

He could have been smarter about that arrest. There were two men close to that girl, but I had picked up the gun. The other was Henry Dayn, and Dayn was pointing at me as the killer.

Here he was, that dumb cop, swinging along the walk turning in to the court. He must have

gone out for a bite when the jury filed out.

He was probably the only guy in the room dumb enough to think there would be time for him to have lunch and a snort while that jury made its decision.

Even as my feet left the ground in a long dive at his middle; even as he saw me coming and his hand started automatically for his gun: I wondered if he had asked to be excused or had just sneaked out—and I figured the case stunk so bad he had to take sick leave.

I hadn't played football for nothing. When I take a man out, he falls down. I landed on top, naturally. My knees tangled with his as we rolled. The gun fell, I picked it up and gave it a heave. I didn't want it, and I didn't want him to have it.

I rolled once and was up and going again. I could hear his big feet pounding after me.

I raced along the line of parked cars, hoping for a miracle.

A shot cracked out, and the bullet's breeze and hum beside my ear made me swerve to the outside of the line of parked cars.

She was getting out of a big red convertible. I bumped her slightly as I slid to a stop to keep from knocking her down.

"Why don't you watch where you're going?" she snapped, her hat nodding a bright birdwing at me. In her hand was a set of keys, with the ignition key sticking outside the snap. I grabbed it out of her hand.

"Thanks, lady! You're a lifesaver. I hope, that is!"

"No, oh no!" Her voice was drowned by the roar of the racing motor as it went off under my shaking hands. The wheels snarled burnt rubber as I backed, spinning. I swung in a full sharp U, took off on the straightaway. As I passed her she stood with her big red mouth open, bewildered but getting madder fast.

At fifty I heard the over-drive snap into place. Lucky! This was a Chrysler, and not more than a year old! I got a thrill out of the clank of that extra high—a thrill of relief.

The power and ease of handling, the sense of relief and exhilaration, gave me hope that with a car like this I might stand a chance. But the sirens whined in to excited steady screaming behind. If they could only be as efficient getting the *right* man as they were in chasing one. If they could only make as much fuss about chasing a real crook as they do about catching a juvenile delinquent. Sometimes I hate coppers, and understand why crooks hate them. But they're only men like myself, bewildered by the complexity of modern life, unable to cope with it. Thinking, now . . . Hell, I didn't have time for that!

With my thumb keeping the horn blaring I swung in and out, in and out, passing everything. But I knew that somewhere ahead a radio-car was going to swing out, head me into the curb.

Then I heard it, coming like mad from the right. Illogically I swung off the wide highway, straight toward it. This facing into trouble, going right toward it,

is supposed to mark the hero. In me all it ever seemed to mark was damn foolishness. That was the way it seemed to work out, usually.

This time it was lucky to run into things. My ears watched that screaming siren ahead like a pair of second-sight eyes, and I swung left just before we passed. I slowed; for a moment I was out of sight. My ears followed the wails, converging, meeting behind me, dying down as the police cars met and stopped to compare notes. I kept going right with traffic now, not attracting attention. Every thing depended on whether the driver had seen the big red Chrysler swing off ahead of him.

I parked the thing that was only a dead give-away now. I smoothed my hair, straightened my tie, got out and walked off.

I knew where I was going, at first. There was one man, Dayn, responsible, and I knew where to find him. But even as I gave the taxi driver the address, I realized it was no go. He would know I might come to him, try to kill him.

When a crook gets hot, he's usually prepared. He has gone the path before, knows enough to have some dough stashed away. He can get it with an alias and disguise; he has thought that out ahead. He has a place ready to go where no one knows him. He's all set mentally for the eventuality, and he gets away, often.

But an innocent man is a different story. I know, believe me! The instant I walked away from that car, I was destitute. I knew it when

I reached in my pocket for my money. My dough was in the police station; neatly filed away with my wallet, identification, license, everything necessary to get around in the world! I couldn't go where people knew me! I was *hot*, and I didn't know what to do. It was a thing that I had never expected to happen to me, a law abiding citizen or a reasonable facsimile of one.

If I went to my home, the first thing the neighbors would do would be to lift the phone and call police. If I didn't, I was broke, a fugitive, completely helpless! I couldn't call on a friend, I had none, now, who didn't believe I was an escaped murderer, or would before I reached them.

I couldn't even trust my own sister. The first one the cops would watch was her. For the first time in my life I realized what a crook is up against. Every man is suspect, a possible enemy who can call down upon you the whole thundering herd of social Thou-Shalt-Nots.

I stopped the cabbie after a few blocks, mumbled something about forgetting my money and to skip it, I'd have to walk. He cursed politely, grinned and drove off.

I stood looking into a hat store window, looking at the "lovely" hats, so inaccessible, and just now a hat seemed to me the most needed, the most wonderful, the most desirable thing on Earth. For, without my hat, I attracted attention. With a hat, I could pass for a normal, uncensored ambulant.

I couldn't stand here. I had to

put plenty of space between me and that parked red convertible.

My brain spun its wheels, trying to get some traction on the question: what to do? If I had been a crook, there would have been a dozen places to turn, but I was as helpless as a country boy his first day in the city.

I slunk up an alley to avoid the cop coming along the curb. After an hour of such progress, I wound up under a wharf by the river, around me warehouses, rumbling trucks, and few people. I lay there waiting for dark, feeling like the worst criminal on Earth. I must be, to have such a hunted sensation—a feeling that doesn't ever stop, a fear that waits for the slightest attention in the surroundings to become a desire to start running. This keyed up watchfulness became the most tiresome thing. I sank into the shadows of that wharf's pilings with a sigh that startled me, so that I raised up, looking for who might have heard. Then I crawled up under the planks as far as space would let me and lay motionless, exhausted and despairing. There just wasn't any way!

Freedom wasn't freedom! Not for me, ever again. I had just made the walls of my cell a little bigger, and soon they would close in upon me. How could I get away without even trolley fare to the city limits?

I remembered how my reflection had looked in that hat store window. My black hair tangled and crazy-looking in spite of all my fingers could do, my shirt collar torn, my coat stained with grass and mud, my eyes dark with

desperation, the strain of the past week of tension showing in every line of my weary face. My tall figure was one impossible to mistake if anyone were looking for me, with the wide, bony shoulders and too big hands dangling in the glass, wishing for a hat to hide my hair. As if a hat would hide me.

Dark at last, and still the hours dragged by. I was just plain afraid to leave the burrow under the planks of the wharf. The rumbling trucks grew fewer and fewer, the occasional feet overhead ceased entirely. I shivered as I worked my way cautiously out. It was no place for a permanent camp.

In the shadows I waited for one of the trucks to go by slow enough to hop. A big green van trundled by, bumping cautiously over the broken asphalt, crushed by the heavy freight of the water front. I raced after it, caught up with the chained tail gate, heaved myself up—

No way to get in! The truck was going faster, but this was definitely not the vehicle for me. There was just room between the tail gate and the body to get a handhold—and that was all. No way to get my body up and over and into the body. A man can't hang on to a bumping truck forever. I let go, before the thing picked up so much speed the fall would kill me.

My feet raced, trying futilely to stay under me at thirty miles or so an hour. They didn't make it, and with a tearing sense of utter futility I fell and my face seemed to strike a blaze of light and pain

from the road. I lay stunned for a long minute, but the approaching lights of a car struck such fear into me that I scuttled on all fours off the street. I ran like a dog out of the dim light and into the deep shadows of the big warehouse front. The car stopped, a man got out and flashed his light around. The man looked familiar to me, but I was too tired, too dull with fear and pain to think where I had seen that reptilian figure before.

He spoke to the other man in the car: "I'd have sworn I saw him fall off that truck! We've got to get hold of him. Only way we can make it stick is to give him some more of the same—and we've got one. He's got to seem to be a *fiend!*"

The voice from the car murmured something like: "He likes trucks, give him . . ."

The man with the light got back in. They drove off. If only I had given the incident more thought . . . But I was in no shape to think. It meant nothing at all to me.

I sighed with a sense of being shut out entirely as the car drove on. I needed that man, how I needed him. My torn face dripped blood in a stream. I could hear it drip, drip on the stones under my feet. And I couldn't walk out and ask for help.

I realized with a vast depth the meaning of the hackneyed phrase "outside the law."

Even with a broken leg, a busted head . . . even with a bullet in me, I was better off *without* the ministrations of my so-helpful fel-

low men.

The help I needed; the friendly faces of the citizens, of ordinary men and women, that help they are often so generous in giving, meant death for me, tonight.

The thought, the need for help, was scorching in my brain. It's strange how many unwanted thoughts cling in the mind when you need it most, need to concentrate on the trouble at hand.

Only my face had suffered. The broken leg and the bullet in me were just imagination. But I doubted they would remain imagination long.

I couldn't show this face of mine to anyone.

A silly rhyme was running through my head: "There was a crooked man, lived in a crooked house . . ." and to me that man was justice, turned by chance to a monster who was following me through the night, waiting to pounce.

Then he was going to ask questions. Questions I couldn't answer. Then he was going to burn me . . .

I rubbed my head. I was plenty sick.

I staggered, and leaned up against the sooted dark stones of the building front, and the sick shock of my fall went over me in waves of weakness.

Right then if a cop had walked up I'd have said "All right, burn me, I don't give a damn."

But he didn't, and after a minute the old strength crept back into me and I gathered myself to try the next truck that passed.

Luck gave me an empty, and as I heaved myself over the tail gate and fell into the bed of the truck, my hands sank deliciously into tossed padding blankets. It was a moving van, with equipment lazily outspread where the last job had left it. Two seconds, and I was asleep.

I awoke with no idea where I was or what had happened, knowing only I was moving on into the night.

As I moved, my sore face and wrenched muscles all protested. I groaned aloud. With the pain, awareness flooded back, and I scrambled to the big tail gate to look and find where I was.

As I looked out the truck turned off the highway, began to roll along a dark tree-shadowed road.

Over the tree tops I could see the rosy glow of dawn. It was time to get myself out of sight before it was really broad daylight. I pulled myself over the tail gate, hanging by my hands. The truck was gaining speed again after the turn, now was as good a time as any; no telling when they'd stop. But they slowed, turned in. Just my chance, and just in time!

I let go, thinking I could run it out. But my feet just flew out from under and I hit hard but rolling. For a long minute I didn't know anything. Then I crawled off the road into the gutter and lay there while the light strengthened. In a moment I made it to the fringe of bushes, crawled under a fancy wire fence. I knew I was on the immense lawn of someone's home.

It was getting too light to move around. There was nothing to be seen up where the house ought to be but great dark tree shadows. The truck had gone to this house! Lucky I got off when I did; I'd have been found.

I stood up, wiggling my joints one by one just to make sure they worked, and started walking up the grade of the lawn.

I almost stumbled over the woman's body!

To each of the mites of the race called humanity, comes a time and a place where the individual knows futility. Then his *self* shows its face as a delusion and a snare.

For me, Don Fisher, that time and that place was this particular now.

The woman's body lay, looking up at me with empty opaque eyes, helpless and somehow terrible in her light blue dress with the little white flowers on it. Her red mouth was open, and her pale hair was strewn like many broken halos, the color of pale cream, curling around her innocent face. Halos, pale yellow, and mixed with dark, dried blood.

She even *resembled* Dorothy Wayne! I could hear in my mind the prosecution's police psychiatrists explaining my mad desire to kill blondes in blue dresses: "A fixation due to some unfortunate occurrence associated with a blue dress and blonde hair, in his early childhood."

I knew now that fiend Dayn had done this, put this corpse here before me. I knew it was some super-

clever trap; that Dayn was some cosmic deformity of Fate—my fate—into which I had stumbled unavoidably.

I finally raised my eyes, and they centered, glued there, on a figure standing just beyond in those great tree shadows. I expected anything, some personification of the unnatural demon behind this deed, Dayn himself, but I didn't expect the person the figure turned out to be.

The young woman moved from the shadows, advanced toward me in the light of the red-bright dawn.

About her small waist was a glittering girdle of fine metal mesh. In the girdle were caught up the shining loops of dark, yet translucent satin. The flesh of her slim thighs seemed to gleam through, there was a magic in the movement of her hips.

Her torso was a startling white column above, barred by two tapering straps of black fabric broadening over her full breasts' clean thrust. The white rounds of her shoulders were naked but for a floating black veil that served only to define the pure forms of her arms.

There was a terrific magic about the moment and the strange woman standing silent above the dead girl. I could not bring myself out of it; the daze and shock and sudden death so still on the grass.

But there was a different and whiter magic, vividly alive, that dwelt mostly in her dark coiled hair, and in her eyes' flash on mine.

"It looks deliberate," she said.

"It was no accident," I answered, my own voice sounding weak and hoarse.

I took my eyes from her striking face, from the dark depths of my own whirling thoughts, and looked down again at the dead girl. She lay there between us on the stained grass, like some terrible secret we two alone knew, that we must never tell anyone to save them pain and worse.

"I wonder why anyone would want to kill a girl like her?" My jaws were too stiff to talk plainly.

She gave me a grim look, incongruous on her face, a face I now saw as younger and less sure of itself than I had at first imagined.

"I know why it was done. What I'm worried about is who the next will be? And if I'm right, I'm next!"

I felt a relief, and a new anxiety, both at once. "You're not thinking I did it then?"

"No. I saw you come, saw your surprise and shock. I am wondering just what is the wisest thing for me; to trust the police to protect me, or to run as far as I can run?"

She turned and walked into the shadows, and I followed her. I couldn't think what else to do.

She went toward the clump of dark trees, her body a black silhouette of beauty against the morning sky of flaming scarlet. Beneath arching, densely leaved branches she led me to a wall and through a small, metal-braced door of wood into what I knew

must be the cellar of the house I had glimpsed above the trees. No one could have seen us unless they were deliberately hidden and watching that body from somewhere.

I whispered: "Who is the dead girl? What place is this? Your home?"

"The girl was my father's secretary. This is my father's house and his laboratory. He is Monte Ballew, the physicist. She is dead because she knew the contents of his notes, which she transcribed every day. I will be dead too, unless I get away from here. I am trusting you because I heard that truck pass and your feet hit the road when you jumped. From that I deduce you are broke, also that you could have no connection with the murder. I know my father had placed an ad for help, so you must have come in response to the ad. I need help to get away; chance brings you. Are you afraid?"

"Very much afraid. You see, you don't quite understand. I *know* something about this murder. I just escaped from a similar murder. I mean I was on trial for a similar murder. She was also blonde, also a secretary—to a man named Henry Dayn. Dayn said he saw me do it. Since I didn't do it, I am probably the only one who knows Dayn *must* have done it. I thought that when I stumbled over this body, that Dayn was building up a case against me as a fiend, but I couldn't understand the reason behind it as I am not even well acquainted with him."

"You think you were brought to the scene of this murder by design, that the truck you stole a ride on was a plant, to bring you here. I see. My father knew a man named Dayn! He was counting on Dayn to finance the development of a certain invention. You've told me enough. I know who is behind this now!"

"Explain it to me, if you understand."

"We haven't time. They evidently mean to have you caught at the scene of this murder, will be here in minutes. I have to trust you, and you will have to trust me, to help me. It takes two to do what I will have to do to escape. Come with me. Long winded explanations can come later. It's we two against a powerful gang of commercial pirates headed by Dayn, apparently."

She walked rapidly along a concrete corridor.

I was astounded by the completeness of the equipment in the combined laboratory and machine shop into which she led me. It was a strange place, filled with strange tools. Dominating the wide expanse of floor was an assembly of peculiar electrical apparatus, great coils surrounding a wire cage, in which were two leather benches. On the benches were two crates of wire, like rabbit hutches.

For ten minutes, she didn't say a word. She busied herself with hooking up cable ends, pulling great switches which started motor generators humming. She asked me to watch a certain dial, tell her

when it read full charge.

Current pulsed in visible coruscations of some strangely different electrical energy through the ring on ring of heavily wound coils surrounding the wire cage and the two benches. The central part of the cage formed a focus for this pulsing, visible aura of strange force.

At last I exploded: "Give with some information, will you? I'm only human!"

She started talking absently, still busy with adjustments and procedure which meant nothing to me.

"This is a stasis generator which my father built. It is the reason he has disappeared, and for that dead girl out on the grass. They both knew the details of its construction. The plans and my father have been taken by some gang, probably hirelings of some industrial pirate—I don't know who. This machine itself will be destroyed as the last step in their appropriation of my father's invention. I will also be killed just on the chance that I know too much about it. I have just one chance for life, I know. That is to enter that thing and start it up. No one but my father knows what will happen to the person who does that, but I can guess from hearing him talk now and then. I had hoped you would go with me, for I don't know what I might run into . . ."

"Why does no one know? I don't get it."

"So far as I know, the tests on this thing were done only with

animals. You see, this is my father's conception of a way of avoiding what he called the 'flow of change.' To my father, there was no 'time' as we think of it. There was only 'change.'"

"Oh," I grunted. She might as well have said "soup is nuts" for all it meant to me.

"This is what he called a *stasis machine*. He put animals into these cages on the two seat-like places. Then he pulled the switches . . ."

A shot whined across the room, striking a shower of sparks from the copper bus bar in front of the girl's head. The sound made us both whirl. Standing there at the entrance we had just used was a squat, broad individual, a gun in his hand. He was not smiling. He was just taking aim to make sure this time. I picked up a wrench and threw it in the same motion. It bounced off his temple with a crunch I could hear above the motors. He dropped like a sack of potatoes.

Miss Ballew stood white and shaken, still expecting the death bullet that didn't come. I went to her.

"Come out of it! What do we do now? There'll be more of those, if you've got this straight."

"There is only one escape. There is too much money involved to trust police. We've got to risk Dad's gadget. He thought it was a path to what ordinary men call Time. Here, help me take these empty cages off the seats."

Together we tossed the wooden

cages away from the weird mechanism. I sat down beside her, more from not knowing what else to do than any confidence she knew what she was doing. But she did!

She pulled this lever, pushed that button, pressed something with her foot. A transparent gray cloud of strangely humming force sprang about us, shutting off the concrete walls, the reaches of work benches, the rows of little models and tools and other inexplicable gadgets.

The strange hum grew into a shrill whine, the silvery gray force field changed slowly to a rosy, life-like hue. Miss Ballew began to talk now, suddenly free of the tension of fear that had been upon her since I met her.

"We are safe as long as that field is about us. You see, Dad developed this to slow down the process of change, which was his way of saying he stops Time. Dad believed that Time does not exist as men think; that it is really always Now; that if we could shut out the strange force that causes inevitable change progressively to alter things, one would in effect 'travel in time.' I don't understand his deeper theories myself. He calls this a stasis field, but he also has a way of reversing polarity and by that means he says the machine becomes a part of one or the other of two alternate flows of change. Thus he planned to travel backward or forward—as we think of it—in Time."

"Which are we doing now?" I was not yet adjusted to the rapid sequence of events. So far I had

been a blind passenger on Fate's little chariot, but I certainly wanted to get oriented.

"He wasn't sure. He said he hadn't traveled on it; but knowing him as well as I do, I didn't believe he hadn't tried it out personally. He said he only sent animals into it, brought them out again; but he produced some strange materials. I could never fathom their source for sure, but animals wouldn't have brought them back."

"Then it is possible the thing works okay, and we aren't just finding a fancy way of committing suicide?"

"His disappearance or murder told me that his machine had some practical application in modern industry, at least. If it works as I think it works . . ."

She shut off the power. The gray field came back silvery and gleaming, the dull rose-color died away, the shrill whine became a slowly decreasing humming . . .

Green reaches, misty with lifting golden clouds trailing long streamers of glory touching with filmy tips the fantastically curved limbs of the wide-leaved growths. Pointed mounds farther on, weathered rocks covered with some utterly soft moss, soft gray-green rounds of receding shape lost in the layered golden mists. Tumbling little streams, tinkling from pool to pool, and splashing, gaudy birds diving for gaudier finny quarry in the pools.

We sat silent, in our coils of wire and metal rods and black

bench seats, our eyes still unaware completely of the tremendous change; our minds adjusting, and slowly the new world took us in, made us over . . .

We stepped down from the machine hand in hand, laughing as Hansel and Gretel laughed before the wicked witch's ginger-bread house. We felt like children released from school for the summer vacation.

"Is this past, or future?" I asked her.

"I don't know, and I don't care. Father would say we had remained in stasis while all about us changed. Whether the change was progressive or regressive seemed to him only a difference of polarity of flow, or some such grouping of meaningless words. We are here, strangers in a strange land, two people in a place and time where perhaps no other human of any kind has ever been. Is it not enough to see and hear and smell? Must you know what o'clock, what day and month and year? Are you listening for a dinner bell?"

"No, I don't care much, at that. And least of all am I interested in any quick return to our former world. Let's explore, like Adam and Eve, or should I say like Robinson Crusoe and his man Friday?"

She didn't answer my question, only gave me a sidelong look.

Lazy golden clouds trailing streamers of glory, fantastic curved limbs jutting from wide-leaved trees, strange pointed mounds of

weathered rock covered with soft gray moss—and a woman's body looking up at me with empty opaque eyes, in a light blue dress with little white flowers on it!

Her pale hair curled around the innocent face, empty with the tragedy of death!

By now, which was several gorgeous days later, we were calling each other by our first names. I called Kit, pointed at the tragic little figure on the grass. In this new strange time, this other world ". . . How did she get here, Kit?"

Kit stood looking down, and the fear on her face was not what I liked to see.

"It means we've got to keep running, Don. It means the outfit that killed Dad has another machine the same as ours. Whether they built it from stolen plans, or whether Dad had a secret model he didn't tell about, I don't know. After all, they may have had years of normal time to build it in since we entered stasis. This girl's body must have been placed in that machine, or they went back in Time, got it—and dropped it here. Between our position in space-time and our former one there is a constant. That is why she is where we could stumble over her—because that place, whether future or past, is one with this."

"What an evil thing! To haunt us with her body . . ."

"They did it deliberately!" Kit said fiercely. "They are operating a stasis machine, systematically searching for us. They are on this exact spot, but are now somewhere

else in the flow of change."

One of the gaudy birds swooped suddenly to a landing on the corpse, sat preening its wing feathers. The clouds of golden glory parted, the wide, friendly face of the sun sent a shaft of light across the glade. The alien beauty of this world gave us a sense of smallness. This body and our fear of the murderers who had placed her here, our own brutal mad world and its troubles and greed, were so unrelated.

I picked the girl up in my arms, and Kit and I turned toward the stasis machine. We both realized without words that we had to leave, and I couldn't just leave her there at the mercy of the carrion birds.

Across the quiet gray moss a long shadow moved, to fall upon our path to the stasis machine. We turned, startled, for so far we had observed no life in this world larger than a mild rabbit or two.

Dayn looked taller, more venomous, more sure of himself. He seemed to have dropped some mask that had made him seem human, here outside the world of mankind where he could afford to be himself. Beside him was another tall, too lean, too serpent-like figure. This second creature was not clothed in over-tailored, expensive cloth, like Dayn. He was wrapped in a gown such as Earth has not seen for twenty thousand years. It shimmered and glinted. Splashes of jeweled pattern set with blood red stones gave it a sinister, repellent beauty. His legs were bare, and thonged san-

dals were bound on his feet. He pointed a weapon at us, a plastic tube filled with a liquid, some kind of spring and plunger arrangement nested on the far end of the tube.

I knew them for what they were, now. Inside I knew. But consciously, I was all at sea. How much more was there to learn . . . ?

Beyond the pointed mound on which they stood I saw the glittering coils of another stasis machine to tell me that here was the pursuit we expected. I took a long stride toward our own machine, to make a run for it. Dayn's dark eyes glittered. He tugged out an automatic in one swift motion. I stopped.

"Do I have to kill you, or will you come along quietly?" he asked, as if it didn't matter much which we decided.

Kit answered.

"Don't shoot, we'll go with you."

He tittered, a small kind of hissing laugh.

"Your machine can stay right there, no one will bother it . . ." He seemed to see some rare joke in leaving that complicated invention abandoned here in a Time and Place so remote from the modern world whose tools and ingenuity had created it.

I didn't like Dayn to feel he was having it all his way. I put the dead girl down, with some thought of crashing a fist to his jaw and taking both of them apart if it killed me. But he didn't let me get that close.

"Oh no, you don't! Pick her up

again; it's better that way." His gun and that weird weapon in the hands of the thing beside him both emphasized the point. I picked her up again.

The white face, graying shadowed flesh, the beady black eyes, the neat tie and well-tailored suit, the attitude of venomous veniality which made up his expression, the vanity and pride in the accomplishment of his own design—I really hated the man, if he was a man. If I had known his complete plans then, I think I could have tried to kill him, no matter what. I didn't get even that much chance, later.

"How did you trace us?" asked Kit, as sweetly as if we weren't both sure he meant to kill us when and where it was convenient.

"A gadget one of my engineers cooked up which detects certain types of magnetic fields even through the stasis field. The gadget told us where you were in space, and another gadget we have for smelling through the paths of change—as your dear father called them—did the rest."

"Is my father alive?"

"That, my dear, you will learn when the time comes. Do you think I would kill him when there was a possibility I could use him? I think you can set your mind at rest. I may not have to do any more killing. Things are in my hands now."

We walked ahead of him across the quiet moss. The little water fall tinkled, the birds called and trilled happily. We entered the cage of his much larger stasis

generator. The weird flux of force flickered swiftly into that grayness that is only change going on about one while one stands still, relatively.

Kit called the mountain that overlooked the pampas "Donderpeer," I suppose because she liked the sound of the word. It seemed to fit. Black night and sweet day, raincloud and fog, our sky contained always the great dark body of Donderpeer. Fronds of heliotrope cloud perpetually streamed from its windswept summit—or were those streamers snow, dyed by sky magic to that unearthly hue? No man had ever climbed it to see the pampas spread out below. I never heard the correct name of the mountain, nor learned just what part of South America's wilderness Dayn had picked for this project.

Gaunt green the sides, and slobbered with the great slices of mossed rock cracked off by Time. The base, hidden by the ancient forest giants' tumultuous sea of top-foliage, was yet felt, weighty and tremendous, like far-off Atlas' feet pressing earth atremble.

Our hut, the river, the jungle and the ever-presence of Donderpeer—and of course the steel-bright newness of the ship abuilding which was our use to Dayn, our excuse for living.

Donderpeer watched the work, noncommittal but somehow skeptical. Dayn watched the work too, from a distance. He knew better than to let the men get a too close look at him.

To the ignorant dupes he had hired for the work, that mountain was the vast savage age of Earth. And their swiftly growing "space-ship" was the bright confidence of man emerging from the grip of the ancient savagery.

To Dayn, the mountain was the ideal place for the nest of vipers he planned; and the ship was the work of fools who were creating the means of their own destruction.

The mountain watched it all in silent scorn, expressing the Earth's ancient defiance of men and their foolish wrecking of nature's beauty.

Kit often said, when I came back at night:

"Old Donderpeer does not approve, but he is curious. He's sure the thing won't work, but he hopes it will. He has wanted so very long to know what has been going on since the early days when men knew the Gods."

I would look up at the mountain and shake my head and laugh.

"He's waited so long now. He'll really explode when he learns what Dayn plans for his world."

"He waits for many things. He waits for Earth's youth to come again, and he knows whether it will or not, too. He waits for the world to grow young again, or wise again, so it can talk to him, as it did when . . ."

"Remember that beautiful song 'When on the world the mists began to fall . . .'? I'll bet he remembers how it was before the mists began to fall."

"Strange song, too. How did the

writer know that there was a more wonderful time preceding our own."

"How do you know, Kit?"

"A lot of things point to it. Orchids; many species of plants, such as grapes; healing herbs; the behavior of animals—all indicate that they are the product of a great culture preceding our own. Now we find them wild, wonder why they are so useful and beautiful. They are that way because they were bred that way by a great people."

"Maybe the writer of that song knew a mountain that told him, as Donderpeer tells you. I don't know where else you get some of the mystic ideas you have lately."

Kit would grin quietly and look at the mountain. And I would shiver at the strangeness of the wild scene and the green-gray old bulk of the thing, and the night would come down suddenly and the stars begin to wink, huge and close. It was a wild part of the world to pick for the work he had to do, but for Dayn it had advantages such as no government's prying interference, and no neighbors to worry about. The Indians sometimes watched us from the heights, but they never came near. The electric fence was too great magic for them.

His stuff was flown in, part by part, some of it legitimate machinery, some of it smuggled to avoid the bugaboo of "military—defense priority." We just assembled it, tough enough with the limited equipment, but possible, for Dayn's wages had drawn the

best technicians of the world.

The chief engineer was a decent enough man, a little man by the name of Jimmy Satterley. I never learned much about him. I suspect he had been told he was a partner or some other lure, for I do not think he could have been in on the real meaning of Dayn's work, and he was a very capable man. Dayn operated entirely on the principle that the less known about what we were doing the better, so no one was quite sure exactly what we were supposed to be building. Kit and I were the only prisoners that I noticed.

Kit used to say she could read the mountain's thoughts and that it despised God for letting this work go on, that he could do a better job than God if he were only not just a solid, stolid old mountain.

I would pretend to agree with her, and ask:

"Does he love people like us?"

Kit would say:

"Yes, but in some ways he hopes Dayn will succeed because then people will perish and the others go on into the dimensions and leave the forests to grow at peace everywhere. He is afraid that all his own forest will go the way they have in the rest of the world."

"Pretty wise mountain, Kit, at that."

It was a wise mountain. It probably knew what was coming; that's why it was so gloomy at the top.

Why Dayn hadn't killed us as he had the two secretaries who knew the details of the stasis machine, I don't know. He prob-

ably figured we were harmless to him, and he could dispose of us when the time came, if it ever did. Too, I suspect his ego needed us, to talk to, to brag about his plans. He couldn't talk to the men; they must never learn. And that lean thing he had brought back with him, always at his shoulder, didn't seem to be exactly the kind of mental stimulant Dayn needed. Dayn was probably afraid to amuse himself with him, had to treat him with kid gloves.

Yes, Dayn needed us, to keep his point of view fresh and constantly renewed by contact with us, especially me, who reminded him of his boyhood.

The great stasis ship grew under Dayn's genius. Only I and Kit of all who worked there knew he had stolen the plans, had murdered three times to make them his own. We didn't dare to talk to the men, and we got no chance to do so, anyway. I worked, but always under the watchful eyes of Dayn's guards. He had quite a crew of gunmen. He must have been in criminal activities for years before I ran into him the second time.

Dayn showed up at our hut for a "visit" at intervals. It was during these talks that I got my first inkling of the true extent of his peculiarities, of his belief that he *was* one of the Serpent People, reincarnated, destined to begin again the pattern of their greatness.

Of course, my inner mind had known. I had felt the enormity of his deeds, but after hearing him, I

knew for sure what that lean man-like thing beside him really was, brought forward from the past when the Serpent People ruled all Earth.

That he had gone backward to the time of these people as a homing pigeon to its nest, drawn there inevitably, on his first trip in the stasis machine, I felt sure. In his talk, he admitted it. That he did not expect to let them die, that he expected to bridge the gap of the catastrophic times that had wiped them out, was a shock to learn directly from his lips.

"Fisher, men of your kind have never reached the peak attained by my people, Sons of the Great Serpent. They never can. Their bodies and their brains contain inherent weaknesses not found in we of the Serpent blood." He would touch my hand, laugh at the unavoidable shrinking from the cold repulsion.

"A cold-blooded race, Fisher, that does not age as men age, but only grows. Ah, I have studied the thing, as well as having my inherited instincts to guide me. I'll bring them back again. I'll bridge that gap wrought by the cataclysm that destroyed them. Then we'll see life as it ought to be!"

Dayn would read my inner hatred, would laugh and say:

"No chance of that, Fisher. Design, the design of Destiny." He would laugh loudly, holding me with his eyes in a trance-like state, that spell he knew so well how to cast, that he had used the night he had made it seem that I had killed Dorothy Wayne.

Kit and I would sit and listen, and shudder inwardly at the monstrous plan, knowing that with the unearthly powers of the stasis machine he could do it, too. What extreme chance, what strange whim of Destiny, had brought in-to contact these two things, this throwback complete with the memory of his ancestors, and the one man of all men on Earth who could make his natural desire for his own kind about him come true. What cruel God had thrown him and Kit's father, Ballew, together? What maddest freak of chance had singled out these two factors and combined them, thrown them into the time stream to become—the end of mankind? Why did God want that gap in time bridged? No wonder Kit would look at the mountain and seem to hear it speak to her. "No, Kit, I will fall and crush it all before I let this come to pass!"

Day by day the mighty ship of the Serpent migration grew under the hands of Dayn's dupes, who thought only that here at last was man's savior, Dayn the great, the man who was going to conquer Space! The magnitude of the plans, the size of the ship, with rooms for a thousand passengers, made it seem to the workers inevitable of success. They *knew* that this man knew how to fly space. Else why the passenger capacity? They *knew* that the testing models must have worked, that preliminaries were all over, that this was the end product of a life time of work. They *knew* this man had been out into space, must

have conquered all the problems of space flight, and now planned to create the first great colony on some new world. They were eager to be chosen to go along, to be the first to set foot on a new world for mankind.

Desperately, at times, I tried to tell my guard, the only human I got a chance to speak to, of the nature of Dayn and his real plans. But the big man would only laugh.

"No wonder Dayn keeps you under such close watch. You're as crazy as a cockroach!"

They could accept the reality of the space ship, as it appeared to be. They could not accept the reality of Dayn's cold blood, coursing serpent-like beneath a white leathery skin. The wide-boned face and peculiar thin-lipped mouth were normal—because they were blinded by their own ignorance. Too, there was the pay voucher they received, to be turned into cash whenever they hit civilization again, big enough to cover almost any qualm.

Even if I *could* have told them, they would have seen only Dayn the great, not knowing him as I did when he took off the mask and revealed the terrible and ancient reality of his shape and nature.

Kit and I watched and waited. The ship her father had first built, the little cage of wire surrounded by the great ring of coils, sat shrouded in canvas. It was in a little hollow just beyond the camp. No one paid it any attention; it was just an unused hunk

of strange machinery.

But Kit and I spotted it. We would have preferred Dayn's later model, built on a truck chassis, but it was always off somewhere in the double flow of change, on Dayn's errands, never reappearing in public. At times we knew instinctively it had been back for supplies. One of those trips he must have brought back our own ship. I wondered for what purpose? Perhaps to make sure there was not some gadget he had overlooked among its many strange parts.

The days, the weeks, the months dragged by. I began to suspect Dayn was searching for something, as he was seldom seen. When he did show up on the job, he and the lean man-thing, now dressed in modern clothing, looked drawn and weary; frightened, somehow. I suspected they had lost the exact instrument-setting which had taken Dayn to the time of the Serpent People, could not find them again. Hope began to be born in my heart that they never would find it. I knew it was impossible for him to consult with any other human on the problem. Then Jim Satterlee, the engineering boss, disappeared.

Only the next day, a new and repellent face appeared in Dayn's retinue, and after that regularly more and more of them.

I deduced what had happened. He had asked Satterlee's aid. Together they had found the way, perhaps something was not working right, and Satterlee had fixed it. But he had learned the truth,

and Dayn had had to kill him. I knew why. Any human being would have killed Dayn out of hand, out of horror for the fate he planned for mankind.

One by one, the new wide boned, thin-lipped, ageless and horrible faces appeared about the camp. At the foot of the nameless mountain that Kit called Donderpeer the nest of vipers was growing. Strange looking men, wearing modern clothes as if they were burning shirts of hair cloth. They formed a group about Dayn, sinister, terrible of appearance to Kit and I who knew where they came from. To the men, they were visiting big-shots, a little more ugly of appearance than they were used to associating with wealth — but still, men. They were not men. They were the Serpent People, brought over the chasm of Time by Dayn, to view his work and advise him.

It was old Donderpeer who gave us our chance. Kit and I were just about to turn in, she in her adobe hut and I in mine, after calling good night across the few feet that separated us, Kit making a face at the stolid guard. From the black heights of the old mountain came a strange rumble, which did not stop, but grew to a roar that brought everyone in the camp on the run to the high spot near the center where Donderpeer could be seen, clear and entire. Our guard left his post, and Kit and I did not wait to see whether Donderpeer was exploding or just having a landslide to himself. We grabbed hands in that darkness and legged

it toward that shrouded bundle of metal and wire and ingenious invention that had been her father's gift to man.

We scrambled between the slitted canvas, took our seats in the cage. Kit pushed a pedal, pressed a button, pulled a lever. More than we expected for luck, the thing started up its shrill whine that rose to inaudibility, and the rosy gray of the stasis field sprang about us, bringing safety.

We came out of the stasis, sat for a moment among the coils and metal rods, taking in the scene.

Green reaches, misty with lifting golden clouds trailing long tenuous streamers, tendrils of pale glory touching the weirdly curved limbs of the tremendous, ancient trees. Pointed mounds farther on, a quiet that seemed to have been undisturbed except by the screams of the gaudy birds since last we were there.

"We came to the same place, Kit!" I exclaimed.

"Yes. There is something I don't understand about this method of travel. I suspect this particular place is a kind of focus of change flow, a place where one is apt to find one's self unavoidably unless one plans where one is going."

"It's no place for us, then! When Dayn starts looking for us, we want to be where he is least likely to turn up."

Kit was about to flip on the starting switch again, when a very startling sight spread itself out before us. The little vale which was familiar to us already, overlooked

a great and deep valley, a valley whose lower reaches were usually filled more densely with the prevailing golden mist which was a peculiarity of this world. Jutting up from this coiling mass of mists were the great towers and reaching buttresses of a tall city. A city with life, dodging, flitting air cars, coming and going of many strange shapes, highways flung across the wide river on stilted legs of a gleaming metal that alone spoke of an age old culture. It was a city neither of us had ever seen before, and we thought we knew this vale and valley it overlooked as we knew each other's faces.

"No men ever built such fragile towers!" exclaimed Kit, clutching my arm.

I agreed. No men ever had built such slender space-spanning arches, such titanic up-reaching walls, such strength combined with fragile beauty.

"Strange we never saw a city there before. It dominates the whole valley. We have come to this place in another period from our first visit."

"Let's go down to it, Don. Nobody ever needed the help of a superior people more than we do now. We can't stop Dayn's plans without help of a greater race than our own."

Kit took her hand from the switch and we started to dismount from the stasis machine. But we stopped! I cursed:

"Damn the man!"

Directly before us the silvery rose of another stasis field had sprung into being, flickered

through its successive changes into quiescence, and the truck chassis and stasis machine of Dayn's construction became reality. But the creature who stepped from the cage carrying a plastic tube weapon of the Serpent People, was not Dayn. It was one of the Serpent men he had brought from their time into our own, uncomfortable in his modern clothing, grinning at us with that repulsive, cold reptilian smile that I had thought was Dayn's alone.

"*Bu mok Dayn*," he grinned. I surmised I was hearing the ancient Serpent tongue for the first time, and I recalled that I had heard none of these alien creatures speak English or any word before.

He gestured with the weapon, indicating we were to get in the larger cage of Dayn's machine. As we started to get out of our own, Kit reached cautiously for the switch again. I think he meant to kill us if she touched that switch as he leveled the weapon.

A great voice came down at us from the very sky, augmented to deafening strength! The Serpent man's wide mouth dropped open in complete surprise as the meaning poured down on us:

"You who have entered into the forbidden paths of Change and Space and Time, know that others dwell along those pathways, and have their laws and customs which all must observe. You who bring crime and evil with you, know that is not to be."

It was not words that were pouring out of the sky, but unmistakable meaning that needed no words,

instinct with power to penetrate even the dulllest mind.

Kit's eyes were shining, as I glanced at her, and for some reason my own eyes felt wet with sudden gratitude for this intervention. We knew this thing was good.

Then blackness poured from the same source that the strange voice had come, seeming to be spilled from the very blue of the strange sky, a blackness that became unconsciousness.

We came to our senses, high in the air, inside one of the air cars we had seen darting about the towers of the city. A weird sense of complete differentness came over us, to see the being who sat at the controls, his back to us.

Smooth-skinned, non-human, four-limbed, the neck alone a graceful tapering pillar of strength, supporting in delicious balance a head massive, beautiful as if sculptured in abstract delineation of pure intelligence. From the graceful slopes of the wide shoulders hung two iridescent veined wings, quivering with a leashed strength, with a fine down or fur over the surface of them that shone with a lively, electric play of colored reflection.

We both sat still, staring in complete wonder, and he seemed to sense our intent, unbelieving regard, turned that tremendous, smooth-planed head. The eyes, faceted like an insect's, glowed with a soft power of life, the smooth almost featureless face smiled with a mouth so unlike humankind that Kit quietly col-

lapsed across my knees.

"Do not attempt any self will," the creature said, in English with an accent so thick you could spread it like butter, like a Russian reading from his Russian-to-English dictionary. "Not until you have had your details arranged. You are on your impotent way to the court of the mighty and undying Undine."

We were "on our impotent way," all right. I settled back on the hard cushions, built for more compact and heavier flesh than my own, I was sure. I still held Kit's unconscious form on my knees, and after a bit she stirred, looked up at me, then at the pilot of the silently soaring ship. She threw up her hands with a comical, flabbergasted expression, and leaned back, her face very pale, the color coming back slowly to her cheeks.

Leaning over to my ear she whispered:

"What is it?"

"Whatever it is, it's beautiful, and where there's beauty, there you will usually find some appreciation of the value of life, I believe. Don't be frightened."

The car swooped down toward the tall spires, and suddenly about us the silvery gray, familiar rosy-hued vibration of a stasis field flashed on, the transition much swifter than our own machine's. I sensed that the place and time of the peaceful vale were now shut off from the city, that the whole city had gone into stasis, was traveling somewhere. There was now only the city below, and the

wide silver and rose of an enveloping sphere of force replacing the sky overhead. But this field was steady, without the flicker and weird whine and unpleasant sensations of our own.

We flashed on down between the walls of silent, apparently empty towers, canyon-like, deserted. From a distance the city had seemed peopled, now the other cars were few and distant, the moving figures along the ways were individual, far apart, and unhurried in their purposeful motion. These were not men.

The car settled on a platform that circled one of the towers. Seeming fragile at a distance, here at close range they were massive, of a seamless masonry that seemed poured in place, a gray-rose plastic, softly mottled.

The pilot rose, unbending enormous height, all of eight feet, and slid through the opening of the doorway with a fluid supple swiftness startling to us. We got to our feet, feeling clumsy as robots, and stepped out after "it."

We followed timidly across the smooth platform to an arched doorway. The building architecture was unornamented. Close up it revealed a plainness, a utilitarian starkness. I felt the chill of an inhuman aloofness. This passed as we entered, stood looking down from a balcony into a chasm of interior wonder.

That place had been built by Demi-gods! They had to be a winged race to get about in that immense shaft that fell below our feet!

The balcony we were on swept in looping arcs clear around the immense space, and here and there were openings where one could step out—into space! The fall was at least a thousand feet to the dim depths of the lower reaches of the building. Kit shrank against me in sudden fear of the heights and strange alien beauty.

We stood there, looking down. The pilot, beside us, waved a signal with his arms, then turned and left us. He did not speak again, but we felt his unspoken good will as plainly as if he had said "Good luck."

Floating up to us, wafted by invisible forces, came a glistening tall figure, floating gently to a pause beside us. The face was also balanced symmetry, but blank and sexless. Not unpleasant—just not a face that one would accept as living, except in a dream. The eyes were open, but not active and interested as the pilot's; rather like a sleep-walker's eyes, or one under mild hypnosis. For an instant this curtain of detached aloofness was drawn aside, and I peered into the being's self through those faceted strange wide eyes, then the gaze became absent again. That one glimpse told me why the aloofness—and there are no words adequate to repeat the mighty message.

This was a sexless being, without the defects of either sex, and seemingly all the graces of both. From the smooth shoulders hung two wings, not quivering with power as the pilot's had, but limp and unused to the point of atro-

phy. The chest was high and proud with a full-boned structure, yet those bones had never been human even in the first birth of this race. The hands were long, pale as death, tipped with tiny red claws, and but two-fingered, with the thumb making the third.

It gave us not much time to adjust ourselves to its presence, when it murmured in a voice bird-like and fluting in intonation, beautiful as an angel's voice, yet somehow as disinterested and inhuman as the tones of an organ.

"Greetings to Mentropolis, the City of the Path of the Rainbow. This is the home of Undine, the undying ruler whom all serve. You two are an unusual occurrence; visitors from other planes are few, and never have we had any from your world except we brought them here by our own efforts. Our Queen wants to introduce you to the new responsibilities which are inherent in the possession of the machine which brought you here. The unkindly gentleman with you has been taken to another court, where a certain judge long unused to violence and deceit may become reacquainted with the realities of evil. Come, Undine must not be kept waiting."

I wanted to ask how it was possible it spoke English, but it took our hands, led us to the edge of the balcony and stepped off into space.

Its wings fluttered once, as if in instinctive reaction to the seeming need for flight, and Kit and I both pulled back from the brink, afraid to trust ourselves to the

invisible support. It hung there, looking at us amusedly out of the absent, faceted eyes. After a moment I put out one foot, testing the invisible force that bore it up, felt the complete solidity, stepped out, hung there beside it. Kit jumped, closing her eyes, and I caught her, laughing. We floated quietly down, feeling like a couple of souls about to meet God.

Corridors, gleaming metallic arches, endless rows of supporting pillars, carved with grotesquely variant figures of many forms of life outside my knowledge of life, eerie paintings of scenes completely beyond my understanding . . .

At last into a chamber of crystal-line blue walls and clear transparent domed roof. In the center a silent sphere of crystal, limpid as pure water, colorless yet ashimmer with hidden inner movings. The place was sentient with half-heard mysterious thoughts. One sensed power and life and the force of terrific meanings here, but there was only the silent crystal sphere, the silent glittering blue walls like the inside of an ice crevice—and nothing else!

We stood, waiting, and from that sphere, which we had thought but a strange kind of ornamentation—as we place fountains in the center of a courtyard—spoke to us, not with words, but with the same penetrating thought voice we had heard out in the peaceful vale.

"Wanderers new-come to the paths of Change, you stand before the undying Undine and know it

not! I am not flesh and blood, just an old and somewhat weary mind, imprisoned in this crystal forever. I am ruler here, yet a prisoner, and also, I am your friend. I can do many things for you, children, so you had best wear your finest self foremost."

The soft-stepping creature of the drooping wings backed from the chamber, leaving us alone with the subtly throbbing quiet gray sphere of—what was it?

As if in answer to my unspoken question, the voice said:

"I am mind matter, life-spirit, the essence of self, purified, solidified, given eternal life by means of making the organism of self independent of the necessity for food. It is the intake of food that causes age in all things, as inevitably some part of the food is poison, and eventually causes the death of any eating organism. In our language Undine means one who does not eat, and one who does not die. Long ago, the science of my people made this means of life possible. I was one of the first to undergo the experience of transformation into a kind of life that does not require food. The living that I did long ago is now almost forgotten in the mists of dead nations, worlds and races I have seen rise and perish away again—still I live on. Once I moved and breathed and knew the passions and errors of ordinary life. So I can still understand such as you, after a fashion."

I didn't try to understand; I was past that. Mind-matter? I had always thought mind was some-

thing fluid and electric that existed only in the flux of energies between the films of the mind cells, a recombining of energy patterns occurring only in conditions such as exist within the brain. But if this creature said there was such a thing as solidified mind-matter, I was in no position to argue. I asked, my voice sounding timid and awe-stricken in my ears:

"If you understand us, do you also understand how we came here, from what we fled, and that the person captured with us is one of those whom we fear?"

The creature's crystalline limpid depths glittered almost wickedly, as with an anger too far removed from passion to be called anger. Something gray and fluid and soft seemed to move within a shell that itself was only light reflected from a thought—like a ghost within a mist—but the voice said nothing. I kept on talking, telling of my early life and of Dayn's, of what he now was, what he had done and was doing, of how he planned to bring the whole extinct race of the Serpent once again into life, launch them into conquest over modern man. I finished, saying:

"To bring that long extinct reptilian race down upon our people from out of the dead past seems to me a vast crime that such as you cannot, must not, allow to occur."

Meaning, harsh, clean-cut logic, cold and clear as spring water, flowed now from that strange life-sphere.

"I am to judge of the value of

one race against the value of another, and them unheard, unfensed? You anticipate, my friend. Even though death caught them, if this throwback of yours can bridge the gap for them again into existence, is he not then a hero? Have they less right to life because catastrophe overcame their race?"

"But they would destroy our Earth, our whole life, my people and my country, and establish a race of cold blooded monsters!"

"Monsters only to you, my child. I am a monster to you, too, you know. Don't deny it, I can see it in your mind. To themselves, they are normal, human, as you think yourself. Their travel in the stasis mechanism will be to them the work of a great hero of their kind, a prophet of the future bringing them an ark to cross the raging floods of circumstance about to overtake them. Nay, my little man, I can do nothing to help you; they must have their chance at life."

I was aghast. Her thought was seemingly logical and fair and correct, yet every instinct and emotion in me cried out that she was wrong.

"The stasis machine was created by my race, stolen by theirs, and they mean to wipe out my race, the whole world of mankind. Is that your idea of justice to my kind?" I was angry with the cold logic of that frozen mind, that seemed so correct, yet was actually so unfair.

"I will examine the proposed migration. But to interfere with the destiny of a race as great in

the history of Earth as the Serpent race has been, is beyond my normal sphere of activity. I do not set myself up as Godhead, child."

"To let it occur will leave you with an evil memory of the death of a world that you might have saved. Can you live on with such a memory?"

"I have seen many races, many worlds, many places and changes in those places. Our City of the Rainbow voyages always along the paths of Change, looking out always upon new windows into Space and Time untouched before by us. One grows perhaps callous of the value of life and growth. I will think upon your request, mortal."

"But there is no time, Undine!" I was shouting, nearly beside myself. "The ark of stasis is nearly completed; the deadly venom of that extinct race will pour out upon the present!"

"To us," came her cold, calm flow of pure meaning, "there is no present, and there is always more time for anything we plan. Do not fear, little man, you have done what you could to place your case in the best light possible. Are you quite sure your own race deserves to be saved from extinction?"

I felt a slow burn of embarrassment rise in me as I remembered our wars, Hitler and Dachau, the burning ovens of the Nazi prison camps, the slaughter of innocents that had swept the face of our Earth over and over since my earliest memories. Undine quivered with something like amusement behind that cold surface of

glasslike substance that prisoned her and protected her from death. I turned away, unable to defend against that question.

"Don't worry, and do not fear, little man."

"Don't worry, she says," I muttered to Kit, who did not smile, for both of us were pondering her question: Are you quite sure your own race deserves to be saved from extinction? Just how would the human race stack up to an impartial observer like Undine, if compared with a race of cold-blooded serpents? Perhaps such creatures as Dayn, looked at in the mass, were less destructive of each other and of culture and growth toward good than our own mad race of war-mongering, money-grubbing mortals! Perhaps, weighed in the balance, our own race had less to say for itself than a race of snakes? I walked out of the strange blue chamber of the immortal being with my ears and face hot, my whole body covered with a fine goose-flesh of intense embarrassment. I was ashamed of my manhood, ashamed of human beings.

Undine called me back, and I was sure she was greatly amused at my position and the way I was taking what she must have known was a great shock to my well padded ego.

"While you are here, Donald Fisher, you can be of service to me. I find myself able to see the truth and the simple soul of you very well. There is a growing unrest on a certain lowly experimental plateau of our construc

tion. I will have you placed there as my personal agent, you and your mate. Whatever you learn is for my ears alone, and you will not be able to deceive me. I am sorry to say some of my subjects find it advisable to deceive me."

My heart leaped strangely as Undine called Kit my mate. Surely Kit must think of herself already as my mate for Undine to so refer to her. We had spoken no word of love to each other, openly. I turned to Kit, and her face was now burning as mine had burned a moment before, but for a different reason.

"Run along, children. You have amused me greatly, and what there is of the mortal emotion of love left in my old self, it is for you two innocents."

The sphere became still, a kind of chill emanated from it, and Kit and I turned and left the awesome presence.

In the corridor, the being of the wings was waiting. It led us to a chamber filled with control panels, and moved a lever set in one of them. A blank panel beside us became translucent, then disappeared completely. Across a void that seemed but ten feet, another world began. It was not like this city of lazy golden mist and all-pervading light, but more like our own — small living structures in the distance, clustered about a lake. We were looking down on it, as if from a hillside. The quiet being touched us gently on the shoulders, then walked straight out across that space of nothing-

ness. We followed, hesitant again, but some fluid force upheld us, and in seconds we were walking down the natural slope of grass and low, flowering trees.

The winged being began to speak again, in that voice like a sleepy angel, or a carelessly played, high-pitched organ:

"What is not clear now will soon become more clear to you. Words would not help until you are more used to the circumstances and the workings of our advanced science and medicine, our science of government. I must turn you over to representatives of the government here. You will be in their hands until we contact you again."

"We can't stay here! Every minute counts!" I was shouting angrily, Undine's cold dismissal of my request for help against the Serpent race, and now this thing's casual shoving us off on some adjacent world of their weird city getting under my skin. I pictured what might be happening to my own U.S.A. if Dayn had completed his ship. "We have to get back to our own world, get ready to fight off the invasion. You must give our race its chance to fight for its right to live. I am the only man who knows . . ."

Kit took my arm.

"Calm yourself, Don. It would do us no good to go back to our time. We would not find anyone able to understand. No one would listen. Our only hope is these people. Don't antagonize them. I am sure they mean to help. They will not forget us."

The being spoke again, its voice

more alive and interested than usual.

"We of the wings are called Sphras. You can summon us at any time by merely thinking of your need for us. Some of us are watching always. We understand the plight of your own world, and I am sure that Undine will decide in your favor, if justice points that way. Meanwhile there is little you could do. Take your ease, come."

The Sphra led us down the slopes and along a stone-paved path for perhaps a half-mile, to bring up before a stone structure such as, on our own world, would have housed the Water Board, or the transformers of some Utility Company. We entered, were led to an efficient looking gray-haired human being, a woman, seated behind a desk. The place was filled with shelves, the shelves with books and scrolls and other smaller things that looked like spools strung on wire. She seemed like a librarian, and this place a library.

The winged Sphra gave her our names and a brief description of our arrival in its sing-song voice, turned and left abruptly.

"Just what are we supposed to do with ourselves now?" I asked the gray-haired woman, not quite expecting her to understand English, although the Sphra's words had been English. But she answered in the same language.

"They should have returned you to your own world. But they are so arbitrary, so sure they are always right. We have heard, already, all about you and the peril your world faces. But you'll have

to get adjusted. I will assign you a place of residence, a job to keep you occupied, a social center to meet the sort of people you will find congenial. I can do no more. The rest is up to you and the people of the spheres."

"We met but one, Undine the Ruler. Are there others who live in such crystals?" I asked.

She nodded, studying a form she held in her hand. Kit and I looked at each other a little glum-faced. There was something so humdrum about this place after the awe-inspiring city of the Rainbow.

Kit asked: "Aren't the people of the spheres popular here?"

The gray-haired woman smiled, a weary, wise smile.

"Our people feel somewhat stifled with their uniformly efficient administration. Nothing is ever allowed to happen that is exciting or different or dangerous. We are human, not minds solidified in a crystal, you know. The sphere people cannot understand why we should want to do anything but study and grow more wise, more like themselves. Yet they have pretty well conquered age for us; we are young a long, long time, and youth requires something like a fling. Sport, love, peril, sin, wild oats—you know what I mean. I would give my soul to free myself of the clutch of boredom. The most evil feature of this ought-to-be wonderful life is never attacked by our kindly rulers, they cannot understand why it exists."

I asked: "How is it you speak

our tongue?"

"This plateau was peopled by immigrants brought from your world—our world. We are for the most part English-speaking stock, bred from only a few couples in the beginning, long ago in the city of the spheres."

I looked at the stacks of books, walked over, took one down. It was titled: *The Hendier Mordant*. I leafed through it, to find a weighty description of the uses and nature of a certain compound used in dyestuffs. I walked along the shelves. *Isogamy Plateau—History and Prognosis—Ophuroidea and their Development—Artificially Induced Polymorphism as a Life-plan*. Finally I found one, *Romance of Helen and Paris*. I took it down as the only one I could understand in the lot—but the flyleaf, old and spotted, said: "Printed in Philadelphia by Alger Press" and was dated "1804." How had that gotten here? I put it back. My head was a whirl of half-understood titles like *Forbidden Transitions—the History of the Revolt Against Position Control* and *Forcipulata as a source of Genosperm in the Development of Ambulant Mobilier*. I gave it up, went back to find Kit engrossed in a volume of three dimensioned representations of *Dress Styles among the Gregarian Hydroids*. I looked over her shoulder at the most outlandish creatures, tall and slender and slimy-shiny, with tentacles about a head that was mostly juicy red mouth. The "styles" seemed the fantastic motley of disarranged intellects,

varied through all possible additions of gems and gold and other gauds.

"Fascinating creatures," I murmured into Kit's ear.

"Can you imagine, there are worlds full of them?"

"I am sick and tired of trying to imagine what this is all about, Kit," I growled. "Just ask the librarian which way to normalcy, and let's go."

"Normalcy, like Dayn and his Serpents?" she queried, her head on one side.

"Yes, Kit. Here is the most wonderful library any human from Earth ever entered, and I want to go. My feet are killing me, my mind is a dizzy whirl of foolishness, and I could do with a drink. Let's get out of here."

We turned back to the gray-haired librarian, but just then another friend of ours walked in. It was the hood who had appeared on the scene just in time to get nabbed by Undine's intervention.

He was escorted by another of the tall iridescent winged creatures. The Sphra gave its name to the librarian and walked out, just as if the creature were a normal, well-intended human like ourselves.

"They sure are careless; look what's loose," I said, loud enough for him to hear.

He gave me what would have killed if I had been the sensitive type, a look of venom straight from his heart. I gathered the thing was here to prove Undine's point, that the Serpent race had as much right to a future as the

Human race.

To top the injury, Mister Serpent-stooge was quartered with me, in the same apartment.

He was more at home in the puzzling environment than myself. The men and women of this "stasis-plateau" as the sphere minds called it, were an intellectual lot, in the way absent-minded professors are intellectual, without being able to fend for themselves very well. To my eye, they had a kind of helpless, wide-eyed intelligence. Their worldly wisdom and natural common sense seemed to have been destroyed or crippled and their self reliance stunted by the culture process the mind-spheres had grafted upon them. Essentially they were like people of my own world, yet the grasping, hardened commercialism, as well as the push one expects in people of a complex society was entirely missing. They had had no need to develop that side of their character.

Kit was quartered in a kind of glorified YWCA about a block from my own apartment. This apartment was four rooms I was acutely disgusted to find was to be shared by our "friend" from Dayn's bunch. He had even been equipped with a modern-sounding name by Dayn, whatever his Serpent name had been. He had picked up enough English words to make himself understood.

"You call me Simon Roener," he told me, and I shortened it to Sime, which he seemed to dislike. So I learned to call him "Mister

Roener," as I wanted to pump him of anything I could learn.

The life of the place had been ultra-organized, when it was created some centuries before, somewhat on the order of one of our modern schools. One was always "scheduled" for a "class," or for a few hours work in one of the factories, or for an educational "entertainment" at some "social center." After a few days of this, I was fit to be tied. I could not reconcile myself to dashing about like a schoolboy with the last bell ringing, and waiting for Undine to make some decision about what was to be done to stop the Serpent People.

The organizers had left almost no time to the individual for his own use, and at the end of my round of scheduled activities I was usually plenty ready for the perfect, too-soft mattress.

After a few periods of intense resentment, I began to understand why Undine had asked me to look into the "growing resentment." It was sure *growing* in me, too! I expressed my weariness with being "organized" to some of the natives, and found that among them this weariness amounted almost to a neurotic wish-for-death. They had a complete dislike for anything and everything in their "perfect" society.

From this discovery, I fell into the experiment of skipping my "scheduled" activities. Since no one seemed to miss me, I took all my time to myself, attended nothing, spent my days exploring and observing. I fell into the company

of a woman named Nina Lin. She told me that about fifty percent of the people paid no attention whatever to the schedules, but just took their ease.

After weeks of this peculiarly innocuous activity, which should have been a fascinating, absorbing opportunity to learn about the vast mysteries of the life of a universe but was instead a terrifically tormenting interlude where I waited for a chance to strike some blow at the coming invasion of my world, Undine sent for me.

Even more awesome, now that I knew more about the extent of her powers and the nature of Rainbow City, was this approach to the quiet, cool-vaulted chamber where Undine lay in her crystal prison, had lain forever, as reckoned by my concept of time.

Now that I knew this city was an ultimate product, life beyond life, I was stage-struck with a feeling of personal inferiority on facing the ruler herself. Coming into the eerie place, there was only a great round globe of strange, corrugated, cloudy, crystalline substance, and the severely plain pedestal on which Undine rested. I had not noticed the corrugations before, they were beneath the smoother surface, hidden in some lights, visible in others.

She—if she was really female as I understood the business of being female—lay quiescent, the almost unnoticeable lights within moving slowly to a focus, glowing, changing.

"You sent for me—" I did not

know what to call her, Queen or Ruler or some other term. Instantly her thought came back:

"You have learned much, little man. And so have I, about your friend Dayn of the Serpents."

"As well as about his agent, calling himself Simon Roener, quartered with me?"

"Yes, little man, that Serpent period of your world's early history has been reported on. Luckily for you, the race from which our forebears sprang was warm-blooded. We retain also a natural repugnance for the Serpent folk. Most of our scientists have also a healthy respect for their abilities should they develop the habit of traveling along the paths of change which we ourselves frequent."

"They are not benevolent, you have learned?"

"Quite the reverse, from our point of view. Their thought pattern is extremely variant. Few other races in history developed along similar lines. There is little data by which to decide, no point in favor, no way to discount our own fear and dislike of all they represent. They were a strong race, a numerous one, and arts and science had a cumulative growth that peaked—never mind—but we do not want their weapons trained on us. The pattern of their future growth must inevitably conflict with our own."

Even as these thoughts were expressed by Undine, musingly, hardly attentive to myself or anything but her own meditation a hiss behind me startled me. I

whirled to see the Serpent, Roener leveling a tiny device of plastic tubing with a heavy spring and plunger. I heard the crackle of the discharge, saw a stream of seemingly liquid energy spurt from the weapon, strike into the great round sphere of crystal that was both Undine's body and her prison.

The crystal rang once, like a great gong struck with a hammer, then shattered, splintered across, flying suddenly into a dozen great jagged pieces and hundreds of small fragments. Within, beneath the shell, a glowing liquid seethed, agitated, pouring out to right and left in a flood. The serpent man fired again into the fluid center, then he turned and ran, smooth as greased skates.

I turned back to the wreckage of the being I had expected to protect my world from Dayn's plans.

But to my eyes there was nothing in the fragments that represented life. I thought of Humpty Dumpty and the King's men, yet I felt, strongly, that such a creature as Undine could not possibly be this easily destroyed. But I put the thought aside as a mere wish, born of my desire to have her powerful help in some campaign against the Serpent People before they reached our own time in their vast numbers.

A second only I hesitated beside the strange body of the dead Undine, then I raced off in pursuit of the lean-legged Serpent man. There was no sign of him, except a flickering whorl of gray

and rose, telling me that he had entered by the way he had come, some stasis machine, perhaps Dayn's own, waiting for him along the huge corridor, flickering into visibility only long enough to discharge and take him back in.

I stood there, as that last vibrance died away, thinking about the strange facts of the flow of change, as Kit's father had called it. One would think being stationary would mean that: still and quiet. But the actual fact of it: there was more motion observable from stasis than in normal space. Everything changes about one, moves, flows, flies apart, reassembles, while in the immediate influence of the stasis field, no change is evident.

Undine dead! It was hard to grasp, she had seemed to be the ultimate in timeless indestructible life-matter.

Noiselessly the Sphra came up behind me, put one of those weird red-tipped claw-hands on my shoulder. I whirled, startled, to see that absent, blank face, the thin mouth smiling at some secret known only to himself.

"Are you ready to return?" asked the Sphra.

"My God, don't you know Undine's dead?" I shouted at him.

"I know, child, all. Are you ready to return?"

What could you do with it? I shrugged, let him lead me to his hole in space and across that ten foot void to "stifle plateau" as I called it.

Nina Lin was a small woman,

not too well upholstered, rather birdlike in her intensity and quick movements. She had large dark eyes full of sympathy and understanding, and a mass of raven black hair some cat of a woman might have called untidy. To me it looked good. I was fed up with tidiness. This whole place was too well kept to please a bachelor of my natural inclination toward comfort at any price.

It was to Nina Lin I went, in my shock and puzzled state of mind. I tried to tell her everything that had occurred, my own strain of waiting to know what they would do about the Serpent migration, the impossibility of my remaining here peacefully waiting while the horde brought by Dayn out of Time took over man's Earth.

"That's one of the big failings of the sphere people and their servants, the Sphras. They think they can always catch up on Time by moving back in change flow, and that nothing really matters enough to hurry about. If we had lived as long as they, we might be that way too. Meanwhile the Earth goes under." Nina Lin creased her smooth, low brow, puckered her charming red lips. I couldn't tell whether she was in deep thought or wanted me to kiss her. I didn't. I thought of what Kit might say if she found out.

"I have heard of plots for revolt, Don. A number of dangerous, antiquated ideas are circulating."

"What are they going to do? Pull the dome off a study hall, or

slap a supervisor on the wrist?" I had little respect for these cultured products of the plateau life.

"Come with me, and I'll show you. With Undine dead, it may be years before the official notice gets around to mere mortals like us again. We will have to take things into our own hands."

"Hadn't we better get Kit, Nina?" I asked.

Nina frowned again, and I think there was a trace of jealousy in her voice as she purred "If you like, Mr. Fisher. Do you think she is ready to return to her world?"

"We'll see what she says, Nina. She's really a swell person. You just don't know her well."

"She is much too well acquainted with you, Mr. Fisher, for me to be interested in her."

I grinned. I didn't say anything, for I needed Nina. She knew her way around in this place. As for my heart, I was pretty sure it was Kit's, but you never can tell.

We called Kit on the inter-tele-view used here, and met her in the ornate lobby of the chaste hostelry where she was quartered. Nina and Kit studied each other intently, as usual, and I studied both of them. Kit's dark, vital beauty did not eclipse Nina's bird-like charm, which surprised me.

"You see, a certain group here," began Nina, explaining, "has access to an unrecorded stasis machine smuggled to the plateau from no one knows where. I have a contact with the group, and an invitation to accompany them on a voyage through the plateaus, perhaps to other worlds, till they

find a place less dull, more filled with exotic beauty and the expression of joy . . ." I stopped her. I had heard so much of that guff lately it was tiresome.

"Never mind that, Nina, are they trustworthy, or are they people who will make trouble once away from the interference of the Sphras?"

"And when, Nina, do we meet these people, examine the ship; when must we decide?" put in Kit.

"They are making regular trips, daily, from a certain deserted station here in the city. They are gathering the group in an isolated spot on a neighboring plateau, and from there a larger trip will be planned, a full size ship built. We can't do it here."

"Well, let's look the bunch over, Kit. It can't do any harm. With Undine dead, I don't believe the successor will pick up the strings where she left off. They may ignore us for years!"

We took the moving way to the address, near the edge of the city. Arm in arm, I stepped off the way, between Nina and Kit, rather proud of having two beautiful women to myself.

It was a big building resembling one of our own plane hangars in shape. We walked through the wide-open doors. It seemed they had no need for real secrecy, which I could understand, knowing the casual, sleepy ways of the Sphras.

Staring at us was the familiar outline of Dayn's own stasis machine, mounted on a truck chassis from our own world! It was prob-

ably the same machine which had transported Roener in his assassination of Undine. I could understand Dayn's disregard of their watchfulness, their alertness, for I had long pondered their lack of military method myself.

But what mattered to us was that we were walking right into their arms under the guidance of Nina Lin! I whirled, seized Kit's arm in a strong grip, began to walk steadily back out of the door we had just entered. If they just failed to notice us for two more steps . . .

That bird-voice of Nina called in a shrill flute-note you could have heard for a block: "Don! Whatever ails you? Wait!"

I turned my head, saw one of the lean, too-supple figures by the stasis machine leveling a long tube weapon on us. I stopped; he lowered the weapon. I moved; it came up again. I waited for Nina to catch up. Roener came pushing through the crowd, beside him a couple of guards from the camp whom I knew.

"You were the only birds had us worried," Roener hissed. "We set this trap on purpose to catch you, and you fell for it. You won't squeal on us now, and Undine won't help you. What do you think we are, ninnys like these plateau saps?"

In his hand was the same small tube of fluid dynamite he had used on Undine. I didn't want any.

"Just get right aboard; the little excursion is about to begin."

"Your English has improved,

Simon," I remarked, mildly. I wanted to keep whatever such creatures might have in the way of normal emotions such as friendship alive in that reptilian breast.

"I have had months of lessons since I saw you last, you know, 'little man.'" He mocked Undine's way of speaking to me. "I've been back and forth in Time quite a few trips. You should see your little old world today, little man."

I didn't argue; I was licked. I let him escort us aboard, and what that crowd of innocent sheep thought about it didn't seem to matter. The machine was filled. It held about twenty in the big cage when they were packed in tight. Then the field flashed on, into silver and into the rose band. With a jerk and a whine it stopped after but a few seconds. We had arrived; the trip had taken no time at all. We stepped out, and the machine flickered back into invisibility on a return trip.

I looked at Kit.

"Out of the doldrums into the snakedrums," I joked feebly.

She began to walk away from there. I didn't see anyone stopping her. Roener had gone back with the ship. There were about two score people standing about waiting, paying no attention. Farther on were a dozen long low shacks of boards, a larger place where some kind of construction was going on inside. In the distance this arrangement of shacks and hangar-like work place was repeated twice. I realized that Dayn had here several ships under construction,

while the people he was picking up from "stille plateau" were probably forced to work on them.

The rest of the scenery was pretty flat desert country, unrelieved except by low rolling dunes. It was hot, the sun hung overhead, the sand rose under our feet dustily, dry as a stove top.

We kept walking, turning after a minute out of sight behind a dune. I imagine we were not stopped because we seemed to know what we were doing and whatever guard was about figured we couldn't go far in that desert, anyway.

We walked steadily for an hour. It looked to me like an American desert. I didn't feel like going back and asking. We maneuvered around familiar tall cylindrical cacti, putting the village of shacks and hangars between us and the point where we had left the ship. Nina kept crying, stumbling along behind us, not understanding, and I didn't feel like explaining. Finally she grew angry, started back along our track on a run. I had to go after her.

"Listen Nina," I shouted, bending over her in the burning sand where she had fallen, weeping and completely upset, "those friends you took us to were Serpent men. They had started that business of taking people for two reasons: to get slaves for their work, and to catch Kit and I so we would have no chance to warn the Earth people of what is coming. If you want to go to them, I'll let you, but you will be a slave or worse the rest of your life. Now get up and be

sensible. Maybe we can find some kind of life here that isn't friendly with them."

She got up, not saying anything, but sobbing a little. Hysteria, I decided, and we plodded on. I kept talking, trying to bring Nina out of it.

"Luckiest thing ever happened to you, to fall in with us. At least we know enough to run away from them."

Nina straightened, looked at me scornfully.

"You fool, they sent me after you. I was not sure whether I wanted to do what they asked, that's why I never mentioned it. But when you brought up the subject, I decided I might as well take you to them, since you wanted to go. I am still not sure but what I would be better treated if I went back to them, explained myself."

I stopped, staring at her tear-streaked, dusty face.

"Did you know they were the Serpent men from the far past?" I asked.

"I suspected they were not entirely human, but I did not know or care anything but that this might be the way to escape the stifling life of the experimental plateau. I was desperate. There seemed nothing in life worth having—"

Overhead there was a faint whisper of wings. I threw the girls into the shadow of a clump of cacti, fell on top of them to hold them still. An American sport plane swept overhead, slow, circling. It went on, out of sight.

I busied myself heaping sand

over the two girls, then burrowed in myself. We lay still, almost entirely covered with sand, waiting for darkness.

"Do you know where we are, Nina?" I asked.

"No, and I don't care."

"Are you enjoying the life of adventure, or would you rather be back in the plateau of culture and schedules?" asked Kit, winking at me.

She didn't answer, only wriggled uncomfortably. After a time she murmured: "I'll take the adventure. Anything is better than going back to be brought up in the 'way of wisdom.'"

I laughed. To Kit I said: "All our life we have been taught that Utopia would be the perfect world, and when we find one, we don't like it. What was the matter with the place?"

"I can tell you," began Nina. "We have to wait till it's dark anyway. You see, long ago the mind spheres were created by an old old race, who had lost their virility, began to die away. The minds, living on in their crystals, created Rainbow City, voyaging eternally in the two flows of change, as you call them. The mind crystals aren't exactly warm blooded and living, you know. If they ever had sex or emotions, they have nearly forgotten the fact. When they began their various plateaus, experimental closed fields of stasis in which they raised variant life forms under controlled conditions, they didn't know much about human ideas—not humans like ourselves. They had no dream of

things 'as they ought to be.' They took up a group of people from our world sometime in the late seventeen hundreds, or later, and from the most intelligent of them they took the ideas, dreams, the thought of Utopia, you know, and from those several variant ideas they created nearly a dozen different plateaus in each of which they placed two pairs of humans. Since each of these dream worlds existed before only in some human's imagination, and were incompatible with the true facts of life for the most part, many of them were found to be almost too difficult for the young children to adjust themselves. A couple of the plateaus proved nearly ideal, the others were discontinued and the people transplanted to the ideal plateaus. But the one we lived in seems to have been taken from the mind of some repressed spinster, for it is really but an enlarged 'ideal' classroom. All the facilities of study and culture and art are provided, but none of the facilities or even the invitation to enjoy life and sex and general living for living's sake were included. Now, whoever was originally appointed to care for our plateau must have died on the vine, for they never paid any attention, left it up to the Sphras, who are strictly functional in thought, and never originate that I know of. For some reason, Plateau Stifle was allowed to go on, perhaps from some perverse streak of cruelty in Undine herself, to see what would become of it."

I lay listening to Nina, and

thinking what it would be like to live on a plateau created by Wetjen, the author of *Youth Walks the Highway*. I decided it might get tiring after one reached an age of seventy or so, and fell asleep.

The search plane droned overhead twice more, low and angrily hedge-hopping, the motor roaring in that silent desert. I wondered if we would last another day in that heat, and I doubted it.

The somewhat peculiar sun went down, the stars began to come out. I lay trying to make sense of the patterns of the stars. There wasn't any dipper, and my knowledge of astronomy ceased with the little dipper. We could be in Arizona, and we could be on Mars. None of us knew.

Kit said: "We're not on Mars, because that stasis machine does nothing but hop back and forth in the flow of change. We are right on our own planet, but we don't know *when*. Satisfied?"

I grunted, pulled myself to my feet, helped the girls up. We began to plod toward the north, taking Kit's sense of direction for a guide. She might have one; I knew I didn't.

After the moon came up we began to worry a little. It was monstrous, low, sweeping across the sky at visible speed. You could see great cracks in it, and behind it trailed a long tail, like a comet. Only that tail was made up of huge masses of rock or ice, and they looked big enough to cover Rhode Island. They also looked as if they meant to fall right on

down at any minute.

"I never saw a moon like that!" I exclaimed, stopping in my tracks. It was terrifying.

"You are looking at the reason the Serpent People perished," said Kit. "That moon descended all the way one day, and that was just about the end of all life on Earth. That is history, Don Fisher, as you would know if you had ever taken the time to read a few books."

"Look, Kit Ballew, I wasn't raised in the library of a world-renowned physicist, like yourself. My cultural resources were limited to the public school library, and the baseball field. So don't tell me I ought to know something. I am strictly an average numbskull . . ."

"Except for a knack for doing the right thing at the right time. I'll forgive you, Don," murmured Kit, smiling, and Nina gave her a snide side glance. I plodded on, wondering if we did have a chance. According to Kit's astronomy, this was the world of the Serpent People, just before they were wiped out by—of all things—the descent of a moon.

By the light of that speeding monster moon, we made our way to the side of a stream. That took about an hour. We rested, after drinking sparingly. I wondered vaguely what had become of the moon. Then it rushed up again over the wrong horizon! That thing had sped around the Earth in just about an hour!

The stream was perfectly straight, too straight. We walked along it for a short time, and I

saw it was an irrigation ditch. I called a halt.

"If this is an irrigation channel, Kit," how do we know we won't walk right into a bunch of the Serpent People?"

"We have to take the chance, Don. There is a slim chance that another race built this. There were Atlanteans, other races, you know, at this time. We might meet some of them. They would help, and be glad to, knowing we have a way to avoid the coming deluge—"

Another fifteen minutes brought us to a glittering barrier, an almost modern looking wire fence. I fingered the wire, was almost knocked down with the charge of electricity.

We followed the path beside the fence, came to a steel-bright gate. Beside the gate was a sentry box and a squatting figure.

The figure rose on sighting us. In its hands was a long gleaming rod with several knobbed levers along its side.

"*Ob ju dar, nevar!*" it cried, in a voice like grand opera.

Startled, I answered out of the history book.

"Friends, in peace! Hold your fire, stranger."

Kit said: "We'd better keep perfectly still. I don't like the way he handles that thing. He seems nervous."

"He's nervous!" I muttered. "What do you think I am?"

Nina asked: "How do you know he's a he?"

I didn't answer. She should have known more anatomy than

that.

Still, it was an odd creature, even to us who had browsed in the libraries of the mind spheres, where the people of a thousand worlds are catalogued and pictured. He was black, and three little arms came from his neck region, nervous little arms and hands, fingering the knobbed levers as if undecided which to pull. His legs, likewise three, ended in wide pads. They might have been shoes, but I doubted it. His torso was as cylindrical as if machined on a lathe, and his head was pointed, the top ending in several shoots like young asparagus thrusting up. The eyes were wide and faceted, the nose non-existent, the mouth wide and thin-lipped and purple.

Suddenly he gave a loud cry, dramatic, like the Barber of Seville about to cut a throat with a razor. We heard a door open and close somewhere in the darkness, shuffling footsteps, and a normal and mild voice inquired:

"What have you got there, Poda, to get you all excited? Ah, guests! Don't tell me there are mortals beside myself fool enough to live here. Travelers, of course?"

Kit gave a half-hysterical laugh of relief, Nina dropped in a dead faint across my feet. I bent to help her. I hadn't realized "Poda" had scared the girls as much as myself.

Out of the shadows behind the weird sentry shuffled an old but very obviously human man. His white hair crowned a round, ruddy face, making an aura of obvious benevolence. He eyed us, half smiling, from behind his weird

sentry.

"If you would, give an account of yourselves, so that I might trust you, before I relax my necessary vigilance in this wild place?" His voice remained mild, his eyes interested, yet wary.

We all started talking at once, Nina in a foreign tongue I had not even known she spoke, Kit and I in English. The man had spoken to us in English; why should Nina Lin start off in a foreign tongue?

The old man held up one broad hand for silence, then pointed at me.

"I have always found the male of the species more understandable than the female. Please be so good, strange man, to tell me who you are and how you came here in the White Plains desert?"

I started at the beginning, taking my time, and had not got far when he invited us to enter the strangely guarded gate, the house in the shadows, and had begun to set food before us.

Especially did we do justice to the water. We had drank from the irrigation ditch, but sparingly, fearing it was not pure enough to be drinkable.

When I finished my account, I wound up by asking:

"Now tell us who and what you are, and where we are. We have pretty well lost track."

"Hardly to be wondered at. I am a part of a scouting force, ordered into action about two seconds after your first interview with our leader, the undying Undine."

There was something very odd about the words, and about the man as he said them. I thought that he was lying. There was something here that needed more understanding. I asked:

"And how is the undying Undine? As well as ever?"

He smiled and held up a hand. Before my eyes the hand changed. Little by little it became elongated, two-fingered, delicate, with little red claws on the tips. The change spread up his arm, to his head; he grew taller. In minutes a winged Sphra had taken the place of the familiar figure of a human being. I stepped back from him; it was too much for me.

After a short space he changed gradually back to his human form. I did not ask for an explanation. Whatever the powers of the Sphras were, I had no doubt that the demonstration was a small one.

"We never expected to have to interfere with extinct races. This particular situation is new to us, and a good stimulant for our weary minds, tired as they are of unchanging safety, of perfect provision for eventuality. We are making the most of the strange situation, studying it from all angles. We do not want to check Dayn until his newness, his origination of new impact upon an ancient and extinct life-pattern is complete."

It was only words to me. I could not stop thinking of his powers of simulation—though after all, in a highly evolved race, a mere tendency to chameleonic change might become through development just

such complete control of bodily shape and appearance.

His words went on. I listened vaguely.

"We cannot allow the kind of mind that prefers violence to attain to power among the peoples of the paths of change. For that reason we mean to keep watch on this bridging of Time's destruction, and check it when appropriate. I will send you to Undine. She will enjoy a report of your escape and recapture by our so unwanted supervisory forces. I am sorry you feel as you do toward us; we know we lack many qualities admirable to you."

He led us out to a waiting sphere. It was not a crystalline sphere. I realized it must contain the circular coils peculiar to a stasis machine to generate the spherical protective field of stasis. He put us in, and after a few words with his Poda, got in and took the controls.

The rose-colored sphere of reverse flow was about us, and after a minute we rose high in the air.

"Watch the desert as we speed backward," ordered the Sphra.

Below us, the dry desert began to bloom, rains came and went swiftly in instants, the plains became lush with tall grass, then died away into barren desert again. Again, great trees arose, shrank into saplings, then into brush and disappeared. The climate changed, ice fields grew, became glaciers, melted away gradually and again came the barren desert, swept bare of Earth now. Overhead a sun that was not com-

pletely afire, but only glowing dimly red over half its surface, the rest dark and unglowing. I was watching the sun as it had been before it became truly a sun!

"That was before the atom fire had spread over the whole surface," explained the Sphra.

The chief sensation one got from this time travel was a terrific conviction that reality of the senses was *not* reality! It was only a thin slice of it. That it all existed simultaneously though seeming separated by Time because of the nature of our senses. That the field of the stasis generated by our mechanism was a sort of tread, like a tire tread, that gripped hold of the flow of change in such a way that one went along, rather than being subject to the change. Something that served as a boat serves in water, so that one floats, instead of being submerged, subjected to the water, and drowned by it.

The fact was, one's mind could not grasp the whole substance of reality, even when one saw it flow by as we saw it now. One waited in a kind of bemused confusion until the flow of change once again released the senses, and one became subject again to the rule of the more familiar force of constant, slow change.

We came out of it directly over Rainbow City, but Rainbow City was adjacent to a much larger sprawling city which stretched as far as eye could see to the northward.

Scarlet and gold, Rainbow City,

flaunting long banners of rainbow hues, streaming out, mingling with the golden mist that always rises from the city of the mind spheres.

The Sphra explained the city had sat down upon Earth, flashing regularly into and out of stasis, in order that the elusive city of the Rainbow might become a well-known legend among the Serpent People. As long as they could remember, or records had been kept, there had been observed the city of the golden mists. Always it had been there, a goal for every adventurer willing to brave the mysterious barriers which protected its alien magic.

But always it seemed to disappear into its own layered golden mists.

In what was to us days, the alternate time shifting of the city brought us up to the time of the Serpent People's greatest development. It was there we knew we would find Dayn, upon his appearance on the scene.

We were frequently called to interviews with the supposedly dead Undine. I will never know whether she was really destroyed or not. I was startled to find apparently the same sphere and voice in its place, and Undine explained:

"We cannot really be killed so easily. I was just reassembled, all the parts were intact. The fluid is merely a conductive and vitalizing medium. Any part of me, placed in that fluid, would continue to function. For those parts are an ultimate product of intense

growth, and are nearly indestructible."

"You sent for me?" I asked.

"To watch and advise. You know this Dayn and his ship; you might be able to help. We approach into his Time, here in Serpentia, his own race's capital."

She caused that mighty window to open through that seeming solid wall, and spread below Rainbow City was a vast metropolis, more alien, more peculiarly unhuman in construction than any I had yet seen.

"Serpentia lies below. To them this mirage city is an ancient legend of their people. We have allowed it to be seen at intervals of one generation since earliest times. Now we allow it to appear right near their own greatest city. They will attempt to solve its mystery, to enter. I will withdraw, they will attempt to follow."

The city of seething reptilian life below retreated in the field of vision to the distance of several miles. I would have liked to watch it longer — the great spiraling metal rods which interlaced the towers of red stone, the peculiar ovoid houses, the larger public buildings also ovoid, their surfaces broken with curling reptilian designs of an art long perished on Earth, the smoke and movement of unknown mechanisms, the darting dragonfly planes in the air . . .

Undine allowed the city of the Rainbow again to be seen. Toward us streamed a horde of the Serpent People. Marching ranks in the center, surrounded by a mob of curious civilians. Their

clothing was brief, a kilt, harness, strange weapons. Their lean bodies still retained scales on the legs, the loins, the backs of the hands, the rest a green-gray smooth skin not unattractive. Evidently Dayn had not inherited all the characteristics of his long-vanished ancestors.

Undine brought the thoughts of the streaming horde in to us with a conductive, augmentive beam. I could hear their wonder at the apparition of the legendary city of magic, so close, so real! Their determination once and for all to solve its mystery, to prove its solidity or evanescence, to plumb its supposed magical quality to the bottom.

Rainbow city lay below Undine's tower, vast avenues and arching bridges between titanic towers. All was as empty of visible life as if it were in truth but a mirage, some forgotten city of magic adrift in its own strange reality, come to rest beside Serpentia.

Undine must have held many control switches for long range apparatus within her crystal, had means to operate much of the unearthly machinery for which the city was but a kind of receptacle.

She opened the gates in the vast walls, lowered the city on its cushioning field of stasis, flicked off the flickering silver and rose, became a part of an ancient landscape on an Earth soon to be destroyed by titanic catastrophe.

The horde poured in, marching up the wide, eerily deserted avenues, entering the strange great

buildings in excited anticipation of loot.

"Don't you fear them? They will wreck your city!" I exclaimed to Undine.

"I have to let them in, to trap Dayn. He will appear in the future, find Serpentia deserted, and seek backward until he finds this particular day. It can be done no other way. They must all come to the city, and the gates be closed on them. My Sphras are even now entertaining them, lying to them, making them at home, baiting the final trap for Dayn. With his Detectors he can scent us. We could never get close enough to capture him; he must come to us. He will."

Rainbow City, big as it was, was swarming with the Serpent People, and still more pouring along the way their feet had marked across the plain. Undine caused the gates to be closed slowly, and the field of stasis began to flicker, almost invisibly, up the scale into final and complete divorce from the reality of this *now*.

"What are you going to do with them?" I shouted above the piercing whine of the strong stasis field.

"We have prepared a table for them, in the midst of their enemies, a plateau particularly adapted to their future desires for expansion."

I do not know for sure if the City of the Rainbow really traveled in space or not. It could be that the many plateaus were in space adjacent or simultaneous. They could be in a time so remote from the present that they existed before there was an Earth or a

Sun—I don't know. We came out of stasis over a vast flat plain, surrounded by a thin flickering field of stasis, a desert land. From the Serpent People came increasing cries of fear. They swarmed along the precipitous walls, peering down, watching the fearfully rapid flow of change take them seemingly off the Earth, into blank space, and then the strange land appear below.

The city settled to the surface of the plain, a great flat tableland, and over the rim of it was visible the emptiness of space itself. The gates were opened, and Sphras, wielding long swords of flames, drove the Serpent People from the streets, out of the gates onto the sandy, raw soil. When the city was empty, the gates closed again, the stasis flickered on. We began the return journey.

Again and again the city filled with the curious Serpent People. Some were seeking what had become of their lost hordes, others were preaching a strange religion, the coming of a Lord who was taking them all to some Serpent-Heaven — which was the exact truth. Others were just curious. I suspected that some great ray of thought energy put a lure in their minds which they could not resist, for as the day drew on, the job of emptying Serpentia of life was nearly complete. Only a few old people, too feeble to make the long journey across the plain on foot, and some children too young to leave their mother's arms, remained.

The sun swung on toward the

horizon, the moon careered across the sky, itself a terrifying har-binger of the death about to strike the Earth.

"There are other cities of these people; this is not all of them?" I asked Undine. She did not answer. I surmised that the real reason for this saving of the Serpent People from the coming doom was to make sure Dayn got none across the bridge of Time into the future. I looked out of the wide viewing wall, saw Dayn's ship settling lower above the now nearly empty city.

Only for an instant was it visible, then it flashed upward, flickered into stasis. He had sensed danger in the emptiness of the city. The sight had warned him, his instruments had told him of our nearness. Undine laughed.

"Do not fear, he will come to us. He has a mighty curiosity, planted in him in that instant of his appearance."

I would have given an arm to have seen Dayn's face, now that he realized he was facing some powerful opposition. He had always struck me as a man whom fortune had always favored, who had never suffered a severe reverse.

It is hard to remember that time is no factor to reckon with. There was no way of knowing where Dayn had gone or how long he had been gone: he might have taken years to prepare before he flashed back into sight, directly over the City of the Rainbow.

Dayn didn't fool around waiting to be shot at. He dropped a load of something that spread as

it descended, and flashed again into invisibility. Down screamed the hundreds of arrow-shaped projectiles he had dropped, but of Dayn there was no sign. Undine snapped the stasis field on about the city, but a number of the projectiles had already fallen past the field, exploded with terrific detonation on the tall towers and wide avenues. The city still seemed deserted; the explosions wrecked the surfaces only of the beautiful buildings. There was no real damage done. The main load of bombs exploded harmlessly against the impenetrable field of force.

The tactic puzzled me. If I had been doing it, I would have tried an atomic bomb, or at least the biggest block-buster obtainable if the atom bomb was unobtainable. For Dayn, perhaps it was unobtainable. Perhaps these small air bombs were all he could get. Perhaps he was feeling out the city.

His ship came into view for an instant as he observed the damage, disappeared again.

When he next appeared, he dropped a dozen large spherical objects which descended slowly, drifting like thistledown. As they came closer, I realized that each of them contained a stasis generator to create a stasis field about it. I wondered myself if they would merge with the field about the city and penetrate it—or not? They did. He had apparently figured that out. He had planned well. The flickering stasis-shielded bombs touched the great silver-rose flicker of the city's protective

field, merged with it, drifted on down through. After they emerged, the stasis field about them flickered off. They began to fall naturally, gaining speed.

Just what might have happened if they had fallen all the way and struck the base of some of those tremendous, fragile-looking towers, too tall for their bases, I couldn't say. There would have been a mighty toppling and half the city might have lain in ruins. But from one tower a ray flicked out, touched the round falling objects. They exploded deafeningly, but too far from any solid surface to do much damage. I didn't think much of Dayn's efforts and I realized the Sphras and Undine and her mind spheres were only playing with him, to see what he might teach them, if anything.

Dayn must have done some thinking. The next attack was remarkable for its suddenness, and for the unexpectedness of its nature.

From the depths of the city's great base came great thunderous roarings and crackings. Suddenly in the center of the city appeared a round, pitted surface, shoving everything aside about it, and the mighty towers of Rainbow City began to topple right and left, leaning, falling—

Undine flickered into a variant of her stasis, and I heard a mental note of respect in her thinking. I realized that he had equipped some great mass of rock with a stasis machine, had brought it to the site of the city, set the controls to bring it out in the instant of

now in which the city existed. Two things can't exist in the same place at the same time, which meant the city had to give when the rock came into existence.

It was perhaps just luck that left the vital machinery of the city able to operate the stasis. As the great city field flickered through the change into an adjacent flow, the groaning and cracking from the base of the city ceased, the leaning towers settled back with great jars, two of them finished toppling, carrying with them walls and buildings adjacent, casting a great mass of masonry across blocks of the city, raising an immense cloud of dust. Undine was not coming off unscathed from this attack.

I groaned. If Dayn could do this in a few hours of attack, what would he do with some real forces, with a nation of Serpent men to aid him?

"I have definitely learned what I wanted," I heard Undine musing. "The man is definitely destructive. He made no offers or overtures, just attacked on the assumption we were enemies."

I groaned. I wondered if all great minds have such difficulty in understanding the facts of life and of lesser minds. Undine had been waiting for Dayn to offer some truce, to make some parley, to approach things in a civilized manner!

Her innocence of the nature of a warlike individual nearly cost her the whole glory of the race of mind spheres. For the best of their work from the past was tied up in

Rainbow City.

My scorn was heard by her, and did not amuse her. She invited Kit and I to leave her presence; there was no need for us now that Dayn had definitely decided against parley of any kind.

Then began a game of cat and mouse. Dayn was the mouse, and Rainbow City was a very large cat indeed. Above the city now hung a cloud of ships, round spheres, long dragon-fly shapes, small darting arrow shapes—a dozen different types of planes with probably as many different kinds of drives, and most equipped with stasis too, I surmised. Through change after change in the two major flows of change, through variant after variant of stasis vibrant, Undine carried the city, searching out Dayn's ship, and now and again we would catch a glimpse of him fading out as his instruments detected Undine's approach. One by one the ships left the city, to take a position where Dayn was last seen, as the chances were better of him reappearing in the same spot.

Change wheeled about the great city breathlessly, ice age and fire age, stone age and age of fern forests, dinosaur age—we watched the whole gamut of climatic eras grow and fade and grow again across the scarred basaltic face of basic Earth.

Undine cut the city loose from Earth's gravity. Earth wheeled away on its orbit. We went after Dayn as he forsook Earth's path in Time to follow some whim of his own into the past, where perhaps he thought Undine could not fol-

low.

Far below us Earth wheeled backward about the sun in a dizzying whirl. The stars paled and died and new stars came again. Great comets took flaming passage across the solar group. Time itself grew dizzy as we pursued that ghost of a ship across the fields of change into the beginning of all things.

The mightiness of Undine's pursuit shook my mind as all normal gauges of existence disappeared. I suppose Dayn, adventuring here beyond all possible experience of his own, was the most admirable of all in sheer courage and tenacity to his purpose. The sun itself paled and disappeared. Earth was no longer even visible. Space about us became filled with a milky cloud of some substance through which vision pierced for only relatively short distances. I wondered if I were watching the very birth of the planets from the basic dust of space, the whirling nebula from which all suns and planets and life itself was formed?

Then something that Undine seemed to have been driving Dayn toward, happened!

Dayn's ship, fleeing ghost-like, always just a few seconds ahead of our own *now* of reality, seemed to run head on into a stone wall. I could not understand.

His ship became completely visible, the silver and rose and gray of the stasis field about it coruscated with a strange spectacular fiery discharge, as if some frictional force were tearing at it with fingers of hot steel!

A Sphra exclaimed:

"He has at last exhausted the remarkable capacity of his generators. The tension of the Time field is greater than his ionic flow can overcome."

The hundreds of Rainbow City ships, which had been hovering in a cloud above the city, waiting their chance to attack, now spread out, sped across the intervening miles in an encircling movement, ringed, then englobed the long, fiery silhouette of Dayn's much larger ship.

I could hear Undine's thought, crackling with terrific augmentation, reaching across that firehot space to her own officers:

"Take him alive! No being ever put up such resistance to Undine before. He has strange strength—we must understand him!"

I fumed inwardly. Undine giving Dayn respect, credit for the fight he put up, thinking of him as a respectable sample of virile life, made my blood boil! Always, I reasoned, overcultured minds lose contact with the simpler realities of life, mistake common ordinary bullheadedness, vindictiveness, murderousness, for courage, strength and resourcefulness, for dogged ambition striving for success.

But was I right? Was not Dayn in his way really remarkable, his character, shaped by the blood of the serpent, fully understood by Undine, and myself blind to the value of his reptilian qualities?

I could not help muttering:

"If that had been a U. S. Naval officer, or an American battle pilot,

you would be long gone from existence!"

Undine heard me, parried with a swift:

"Exactly. Yet you claim greater virtue than the Son of the Snake!"

Dayn, unable to flee farther into past-change, shifted polarity, attempted to flicker into the silver gray field of reverse flow into the future. But the ring of ships about him caught him still within their *now*, at least a hundred rays conducted away the energy from his flickering fields. His great ship of migration hung there, apparently defenseless. I knew he must have at least one more trick in his bag, and I felt that Undine would probably underestimate his venom again.

Inwardly I was raging at the nature of Undine's heard thought. She pictured Henry Dayn as a remarkable, unique specimen. She wanted to study him as a scientist wants to study some rare, previously undiscovered species. Myself and Kit were common, garden varieties, not worth any particular attention.

Dayn had equipped that ship as well as he could to meet any antagonist. I wondered about his crew even as I saw gun turrets emerge, swivel, and fire. At this distance it was like watching amoeba maneuver under a poor microscope. Kit and I nearly upset an intent Sphra watching the scene on a larger screen in the next chamber. We wanted to see the final test of this "specimen" of Undine's.

Their fire was fast and accurate.

The shells exploded at close proximity even when they missed, and two of Undine's larger ships drifted away from the ring, their hulls torn through.

Undine gave a strange order then.

"Change to replica."

Suddenly, after that order, the ship's guns ceased to fire, the ring tightened about Dayn, he seemed to surrender without further struggle. Then I remembered the power of the Sphras to mimic, to change even the shape and appearance of their bodies—and realized that Dayn had been fooled by the Sphras showing themselves to him as Serpent men!

Thus was the Son of the Serpent taken, finally, by a ruse that must inevitably have fooled anyone not knowing the Sphras intimately.

Luckily I was requested to be present when the captives were led before Undine.

Dayn, now clad in the ancient regalia of some high official of the Serpent People, stood among them as one of them. There were about two hundred Serpent men in that ship's crew, and Dayn stood half a head taller than any of them. Ourselves and perhaps a dozen of the calm, lazy-faced Sphras stood behind Undine's sphere. The Serpent men were lined up four deep in front of Undine.

Uppermost in my mind was Undine's first reaction to my request for help: "Are your people more worthy of survival than the Serpent's?" and my own reaction of acute embarrassment as I thought

of the wars and deeds of modern men.

Now, looking over that line of scaly-hided supermen, their proud erect carriage, the heavy necks bulging with the Serpent's cold, fierce strength, the eyes straight forward in venomous intent, without fear and without dissimulation, without hypocrisy or putting on of virtue's false sweet face of apology, I felt again that acute embarrassment for the race of man. I wondered if a similar line of captive humans could present that same fierce warlike face in the event they stood before a judge as aloof from error as Undine?

How would the human race stack up against a race of Serpents, I wondered? Did we have more right to our future than these Sons of the Serpent, themselves antedating our own claim to dominance of Earth? Undine had killed none of them that she could avoid; they had been taken alive, and the city, Serpentia, had been stripped of life which she had transported to a plateau created especially for them. I was intensely curious as to what was to be done to punish the men who had had the temerity to attack Rainbow City with flaming death.

Undine seemed searching their minds swiftly, and then her thought indicated Dayn, distinguishable from the others only by his lack of visible scales and by his lighter color.

"This man is to be punished by undergoing the transformation into undying life-matter, his sphere to be placed in the Hall of Study,

there to remain until his will to evil has been transformed by wisdom. The others—take them to the Plateau of Serpents, there release them."

They filed out, faces still defiant, rigidly military and unbending, proud of themselves and their effort—proud of being Serpents.

Within me was a mighty question. No human that I knew of had ever become a Crystal Sphere of Mind Matter—a god-like and undying creation of the ultimate in life-science. And Henry Dayn was being given that gift as a punishment!

It is a question I will never answer. Have such creatures as Undine no real sense of values, or are Humans in truth lower than Serpents, when estimated from the point of view of pure logic?

Somehow, I can remember seeing no prison camps about Serpentina, and no places where whole populations were shoved into furnaces. Perhaps Undine, in "punishing" Henry Dayn, was sparing me the devastating truth—the Serpent Race was a greater and finer thing than modern man!

Perhaps, when Undine sent Kit and I back to modern times on Earth, she was really sentencing us both to the common grave all men dig for themselves with their

evil minds pitted against all things that might do them good? Perhaps we are a blind race, lower than Serpents, unable to see that fact, and hence unable to remedy it?

In one sense, Henry Dayn murdered only that he might save a whole race from oblivion. Was Henry Dayn a better man than Don Fisher? I will never know, but I have my suspicions.

It was eleven at night. I had fallen asleep over my desk full of blueprints. The phone rang and I picked it up, shaking the sleep out of my buzzing head.

"Mr. Fisher? Oh, Donald, I'm so glad I could reach you!" It was Dorothy Wayne's voice, and she sounded a little frightened and embarrassed, a little too intent on making an impression. I knew she was going to ask me for something that was going to cost *too darn much*.

"Dorothy," I growled, "I don't think I can stand the trip again!" and hung up.

Enough is enough! And besides, I had a date the next night with a friend of mine who was bringing a new girl for me. Kit was her name, and for some reason, I knew I was going to like her.

THE END

SPACE SHIPS AT LAST?

ON August 30, 1949, a highly secret story escaped the confines of the White Sands Proving Grounds in New Mexico. Officially, it was immediately denied. The denial only served to con-

firm the story by reason of its very prejudice. The story was reasonable, the denial was not. However that may be, here is the story:

Marvin Miles, who is an aviation writer

for the Los Angeles Times, wrote from the New Mexico upper air research center:

"I talked with three men, two senior officers and an enlisted technician, who reported seeing strange objects in the sky, one as recently as last Friday during preparation for a high-altitude missile flight.

"One officer believes sincerely that the objects seen are space ships, and declared that a ballistic formula applied to one observation through a photo theodolite showed the 'ship' was 35 to 40 miles high—an egg-shaped craft of fantastic size and traveling at incredible speeds of from 3 to 4 miles per second."

Clete Roberts, news commentator for radio station KFWB at Los Angeles also visited the proving grounds, and here is the story he recounted:

"I was told by a highly regarded senior officer that on several occasions flying disks had been observed, had been carefully tracked and on one occasion had been photographed. Unfortunately the photographs were ruined when the film was spoiled.

"One officer at White Sands told me that astronomical experts using a powerful elevation telescope established on a mountain peak had carefully followed the flight of two flying disks which were following the trail of a V-2 rocket that smashed its way into the area 100 miles or more above the earth.

"I find it hard to believe the tale myself. But the officer who gave me this information is a responsible individual charged with an important assignment in the government's upper-air research, a man who would not talk lightly."

At White Sands, Brig. Gen. Philip G. Blackmore, commanding general, commented:

"So far as I know, these reports are simply untrue.

"Nothing of the kind has ever been reported to me and I am sure it would have been if it were true."

The general also said that it is true that there is an astronomical instrument located on Mule peak near the proving grounds and that some flying disk reports may have originated from the weather observation balloons used in research work at the base.

At Boise, Idaho, a private pilot saw seven V-shaped objects which he claimed were not United States aircraft, flying near the Mountain Home Air Force Base. He said they were about the size of fighter planes and flew to within 1,500 or 2,000 feet of his plane.

He said he was frightened and shaken by the sight. The objects were flying in tight formation at a tremendous rate of speed. They had solid, circular bodies and a belly-like protuberance at the bottom of the V. They had no visible evidence of propulsion—no propeller and no smoke trails indicating jet power or rockets. They did not bank or tilt when they turned. He watched them for two minutes of excitement while they flew eastward. He is a former pilot trainee during the war and now operates a major airport in the Boise Valley. Said he:

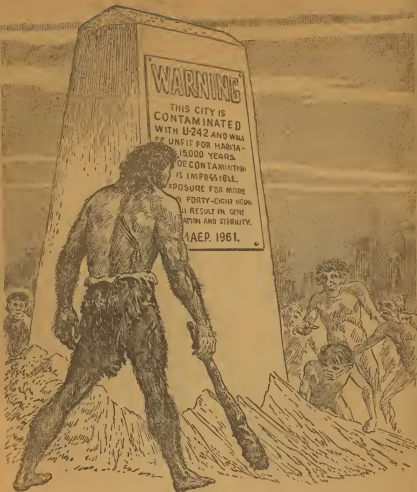
"If the government doesn't know what these things are, they had damn well better find out!"

A rumor, which could not be confirmed, said that the plane's motor had been sent to Washington for check-up on possible radioactivity. Yet, when the rumor was checked, the plane was still equipped with a motor. However, it is interesting to note the connection between "flying disk" reports and "radioactivity." It indicates that there has been such a connection in previous reports.

During the four weeks since this magazine's first issue went on sale, its editor reports, 37 separate reports of "objects in the sky" had been sent in by its readers. Culling the newspapers reveals many more. It seems obvious that where there is so much smoke, there must be at least a little fire.

Readers of science fiction should be intensely interested in this new probability that space ships, such as those pictured in science fiction for so many years, may now actually be invading our atmosphere, and that, as such, they are being kept from the news as much as possible by persons high in army circles.

However, science fiction readers are not the type to be fooled easily by the references to weather balloons, reflections from airplanes, spots before the eyes and illusion. Because, deny it or not, these mysterious things in the sky exactly fulfill the predictions of science fiction writers in all their logical detail.



Before him at last was the God-writing — and at his back, Death.

THIS TIME . . .

By ROG PHILLIPS

When Ken Risdon threw the switch in the power station, he blacked out. When he again knew his surroundings, a whole new life of strange adventure had been lived in a post-atom world

WITH the abruptness of the snapping on of a light I was conscious. It was so abrupt that I could almost be aware of not being conscious the instant before. My eyes were still closed, but the thousand and one sensations of consciousness were a comfortable structure to the crystal-clear well of existence.

Crystal clear! Strange that I should compare consciousness to a lake of crystal clear water, cold and sharp, with all the objects of thought suspended in it. The comparison had a familiar ring to it. I had had a dream like it long ago.

Long ago? Yes. Memory awakened. I was Ken Risdon. I worked at the city water pump station. And I'd better open my eyes and jump out of bed or I'd be late to work.

Home alone. Martha would be at her mother's for another week. I had the house all to myself.

The house to myself! But then—what were all those familiar but strange sounds? An old man—nearly patiently arguing with himself? The far-off discordance of someone trying to sing a song he didn't know the words to? The slam of a heavy door in a solid wall? What could they be doing here in my house if I were all alone. I HAD been alone when I went to sleep—

But had I gone to sleep? I tried to recall going to bed and couldn't remember having done so. I kept my eyes closed, trying to recall taking off my shoes, or whether one sock had a hole in the toe, or whether I had wound the clock—or any little thing that would bring back the act of going to bed before I went to sleep.

If I could remember something like that I wouldn't be afraid to open my eyes and see what was making all the strange sounds. If I could even remember what I had had for dinner the day before—

Into the crystal clear depths of the lake of thought came what I KNEW to be the last event of waking awareness before I had gone to sleep—or whatever I had done. It was in the pumping station. I was behind the control panel for the fifteen hundred horsepower synchronous motor for pump nine. I had the long wooden pole with a hook on the end, ready to pull the disconnect.

I could see the pole hook onto the disconnect as if it were present before me. There were three of them, exactly alike, fastened to the ceiling. They formed a manual break in the twenty-two hundred volt two phase circuit in case anything went wrong.

What had gone wrong? I remembered that, now. The relay had failed to throw to shut off the motor.

I braced myself and hesitated, before pulling violently to make as swift a break as possible in the rush of five hundred amps with twenty-two hundred volts of pressure behind them.

I jerked—

So I hadn't gone to bed to sleep after all! Something must have happened. Maybe I had been burned by the arc, though I felt all right now. I would be in a hospital, then. That would account for the strange sounds—partially. A ward. A hospital ward with maybe a couple of old men ready to die, with their minds nearly gone.

Maybe it was too soon to feel the pain of the burns. I had smashed my foot once, and instead of hurting, it had just felt warm and comfortable for the first couple of hours. But that didn't jibe with a feeling in the back of my mind that I had pulled that disconnect a *long time ago*.

Suddenly I was tired of trying to orient myself. With a deep sigh I opened my eyes.

The ceiling was a glossy white — enamel over concrete. It was low, like the ceiling of a basement. The windows had a heavy mesh of two-inch-spaced interwoven eighth-inch wire on the inside, and half-inch iron bars four inches apart on the outside. They were long windows, but only the top third was above the well in which they were set. The top third brought a view of trees and buildings in the distance.

I turned my head, slowly taking in the room. It was quite long and wide, with considerably more than half a dozen beds in it. They were in two rows against opposite walls. I occupied a bed in the middle of the row on the inside wall. There was a solitary door two beds over to my right.

The man who was patiently arguing with himself WAS old. He was sitting up in the bed across from me. He needed a shave. His eyes were pale, devoid of life. His arms were — I knew what a strait-jacket was. I had seen them in movies. He didn't seem to mind his arms being in a straitjacket. I knew I would. It would drive me nuts to have my arms in one and

not be able to move them.

A heavy-shouldered man with white trousers and a white short-sleeved shirt was walking down the aisle between the rows of beds, pausing at each to look at its occupant. A doctor? Probably an interne. He had stopped at the foot of the bed of the man who was trying to sing. The fellow kept on with his discordant tune without paying any attention to the interne. He wore a straitjacket too. Every patient in the ward seemed to be wearing one except me.

I looked down at my arms automatically to reassure myself. My arms were in one too!

But why?

The interne paused at the bed across from me. I studied his broad back, bulging with muscles like a wrestler under the thin linen or cotton of his shirt. He had a crew haircut that made me think of stories of German concentration camps. From the back the interne reminded me of merciless sadists depicted in such stories that I had heard, but his face, as I had seen it, was American and, if not kind, at least not brutal.

He walked along like he was doing his job to earn a living rather than for any pleasure he got out of it. He gave the impression that he would be a reasonable, courteous fellow—even friendly.

He went on to the next bed. I wondered what kind of inspection he was conducting. He made no attempt to talk to the patients. He didn't take temperatures or anything that a hospital inspection should ordinarily include.

The man in the bed next to me on the right began to groan loudly. The legs of a man and a woman passed slowly along the row of windows outside. I followed the passage of those legs and thought of the string of ducks in a shooting gallery as they rise in the water, pass slowly in front of you, then sink into the water again.

The interne had finished his inspection of the patients on the one row and was coming down on my side. I watched him anxiously now, wondering what he would do when he paused to look at me.

I wondered how it would feel to have his eyes rest on me while he stood at the foot of my bed, quietly and without expression, for a slow minute, then move on to the old man who was groaning so loudly.

What kind of an inspection was it, anyway? And why did all the patients, including me, have strait-jackets on? And what was I doing in a room with old men in it? I alone of all of them was young. Of course it was possible that the hospital was crowded and they had to put me in a room with these old men. That was probably it. But why the straitjacket? Could it be that hospital routine was so rigid that they put one on me merely because I was in the same room with a lot of old men who had to have them on for some reason?

The interne was at the bed next to mine. In a moment he would take the few steps that would bring him to the foot of my bed. I swallowed loudly, my throat dry from the suspense.

I felt suddenly short of breath,

and opened my mouth wide to breathe in deeply. As I did so, the interne started toward my bed. Then something happened that froze my blood and paralyzed my thoughts.

The horror of it tore into my mind. I felt my entire body shudder. I heard my voice as if it were coming from a great distance, laughing — horribly, insanely, shudderingly.

I saw the interne stop at the foot of my bed, his eyes coming to rest on my face—calmly, undisturbed by my shuddering laughter that was changing now to a sobbing, blubbing series of sounds.

Then he had passed on to the next bed. A moment later he had finished his silent trip and the heavy door slammed behind him as he left. How could he know that the thing that had caused me to break into uncontrolled, wild laughter and sobs was that when I had opened my mouth wide to take a deep breath I had felt an upper plate of false teeth come loose in my mouth, and felt my jaw expertly press them back into place against the roof of my mouth again?

I will always remember the two hours that followed the discovery that rather than having my own teeth as they had been what seemed only hours before, I had false teeth that seemed more at home in my body than I did. The paroxysm of wild laughter and sobbing was followed by an ague. I shook all over. I seemed to have no control over it.

Fear would flood my mind to my

very soul. Then it would be replaced by bewildered wonder and a flood of unthought questions—unthought because I feared to form them, fearing the answers.

Gradually my emotions spent themselves and my mind could function again. I had thought everyone in the room except me was wearing a straitjacket—then discovered I was wearing one too. Everyone in the room was an old man—except me? At the time of my last memory before waking up in this place I had been twenty-five years old. Assuming all my teeth had had to come out while I was unconscious, they had still had time to heal up and the false teeth in my mouth had had time to get used to me—or *vice versa*. That meant that at the very least I had been unconscious for a few months.

But it was the instinctive way in which my jaw had set them back in place that told me most about the unbelievable, horrible facts. Such instinctive action came only from years of CONSCIOUS action that becomes automatic. Was I—I drew back from the question—was I an OLD MAN?

The question seemed to have no way of being answered immediately. My arms were imprisoned in a straitjacket so I couldn't look at them. My feet, I discovered, were held by some sort of bonds so that I couldn't get them out from the covers to look at them. There was no part of me that I could bring before my eyes.

Wild theories rushed through my mind. I had read a story once

about transfer of souls. Had I been killed by the discharge from the disconnect and my soul transferred to the body of some old man in an old folks' home? Had I been suffering from amnesia for years? Had I lain in a coma for years?

If there were a mirror . . . I studied the window above the bed opposite me. It was slightly dusty and reflected the beds in the room a little. The reflection was largely blotted out by the heavy wire mesh in front of the glass, but it might show enough of my face to give me the truth.

I lay there for a long time putting off the moment when I would look into that window and see my face. It was self torture, to delay the fatal moment; but somehow I felt it was easier not to know, and have the doubt to cling to, than to have that faint hope taken away.

But I knew that I would sit up in bed and look eventually, and so finally I sat up.

The face that peered at me so intently from the window was that of my father as I had seen him at the veterans' hospital before he had died. The eyes were more sunken, the nose a trifle thinner and sharper, but it was his face. Yet it was my face. When I stretched my lips into a grin, my father's face did the same. So I knew it was my face.

The strength left my body. I sank back and closed my eyes in defeat. There was no room for any doubt any more. I was old. In some mysterious way the years had slipped by in a fleeting instant of unconsciousness.

Irrationally I wondered if the water department still owed me a week's pay. I grinned at the thought. To wonder about such a microcosmically insignificant thing as a week's pay . . .

Opening my eyes again I began another survey of the patients in the room with me. They, in a way, were my only means of finding out about things. For one thing, I was one of them. By learning more about them I could surmise more about myself. For another, if I could get one of them to talk, I might learn more about myself.

The chin stubble on all of them was the same length—about an eighth of an inch. That meant that they had all been shaved two days before, and at about the same time of the day. That meant a barber came in and shaved the whole bunch at one time.

"Anybody want to talk to me?" I assayed. "I'd like to get the answers to a few questions."

The old man in the bed across from me continued his patient argument with himself without pause. The one farther down continued trying to sing a song he didn't know. The others remained passive, their eyes closed or open. No one indicated by the slightest of change that they had heard or understood me.

Each had retired behind a wall of solitude, cut off from those around him as if the outer world no longer existed. It came to me where I must be—in a ward of a state hospital where they took care of old men whose minds were completely gone so they could no long-

er care for themselves.

Here they—I included—were cared for by mass methods. The straitjackets were to keep them from hurting themselves. The leg bonds were to keep us in bed. Periodically an attendant or two came in and bathed the patients and took out the dirty bedding. The stench indicated that that hadn't been done for a few hours.

The whole task of caring for these living dead had been reduced to a routine. The interne had made his periodic inspection to see if any had died or taken sick—not to see if any were regaining the awareness of externality that is the property of a normal mind.

I felt a slow flush spread over my face at what he must have thought of my outburst. How could he have known the terrific impact of the sudden realization that I had false teeth?

How treacherous Life was! Here I had been just an ordinary fellow with a job and a wife. A second later I was an old man in a ward for helpless old men. The years had vanished as if they had never been. They could never come back.

"They can't come back!" I groaned.

A loneliness was settling on me from the icy depths of cosmic space. The impersonal frigidness of the infinite universe was settling about me.

From the depths of my soul a longing rose in me to return to—

TARACONE? That word had welled to the surface of the bubbling waters of my thoughts—and

almost sank again before I could seize it. The multitude of memories and thoughts associated with it had slipped away. Only the word remained—mysterious.

Was it a place? It was no place I had ever heard of. Was it a state of Mind or Being—like Nirvana or Heaven? It didn't seem so. It seemed to be a place.

It seemed to be as familiar as the pumping station where I had worked as engineer. It was a place all right. I had been there—for a long time.

Was it the name of this hospital? No . . .

There was some sort of disjointment to me. I must have been here at the hospital for a long time. I must have been conscious in some way here without being able to remember any of my conscious moments. I must have been conscious when my teeth were pulled out. I must have had to endure the discomfort of a sore mouth—of breaking in store teeth. I experienced momentary humor at the thought.

Yet I had no slightest memory of it all. Instead, there was a feeling that Taracone was a place where I had been all the time since I had pulled that disconnect at the pump station.

Somewhere in the well of memory I *knew* all about Taracone. All I would have to do would be to dwell on it and everything would come back to me. The years had not been wasted . . .

Four husky men in white trousers and short-sleeved white shirts were in the midst of changing bedding and bathing shriveled old

men. I had been asleep. I watched until they got to me. I examined my shriveled body with fascination, and marveled that I had not felt the discomfort of my messed bed, nor been aware that I had messed it.

I studied the impersonal expressions on the four faces as the internes or nurses or whatever they called themselves changed my bedding and bathed me.

One of them caught my eyes on him and smiled briefly while he rolled the sheets into a compact bundle and dropped them into a cart in the aisle. That smile gave me the courage to ask the question that trembled on my lips.

"Would you tell the doctor that I have recovered my memory?" I asked. My voice felt strange and far away. Something else about it struck me as odd. I couldn't quite place my finger on what it was.

The nurse smiled at me again, but didn't answer my question. I wondered if he had heard—then wondered if I had really spoken at all.

I was about to repeat the question when it struck me what had seemed strange about my voice. That realization made me forget to repeat the question. And when I got around to it the four nurses had left.

It hadn't been my voice, which was strange enough, but to be accounted for easily. It was that the words had seemed to be in some foreign tongue. They had the feeling of being in a language that I knew, but hadn't used for years and years.

Had I used a different language in—? Panic gripped me as I realized I had forgotten that word. It was my sole clue to the missing years and if I couldn't remember it I would be lost.

TARACONE! It came back suddenly, like a bright light in the darkness of night. I would have to fix it some way. Halls of Tara—ice cream cones. Taracone.

The door opened again. A man with a beard came in. He was dressed in a business suit. The young man who had made the inspection earlier was with him. Their eyes caught mine and held as they came to the end of my bed.

"So you can remember now," the bearded man said. His voice was deep and well modulated.

"Yes," I said. Suddenly my fears left me. "My name is Kenneth Risdon."

The bearded man looked at the interne and nodded slightly. The interne came down the side of my bed and reached under me, lifting me to a sitting position. His fingers fumbled at my back. They pulled around. Two cords were in his hands. He pulled firmly on them and I felt the straitjacket come loose.

My arms dropped. I had no power to move them.

I was trembling once more, terrified lest my lips break out in wild laughter again and drive the doctor away, convinced I was the way I had been. I bit my lips until they hurt.

"Take it easy, Mr. Risdon," the doctor said soothingly. "You'll be all right."

His voice calmed me. I smiled at him and felt my lips trembling as I did so.

"You'll have to carry him, Fred," the doctor said. In the same instant as if anticipating the doctor's instructions the interne picked me up. I knew then that I had been lying in that bed for a long time.

I tried again to control my arms. They lifted clumsily, feeling numb. I gave up and let them fall limp while Fred carried me from the room.

The hall was dimly lit. Fred carried me, his muscular body moving effortlessly. The doctor walked ahead. Finally the hall widened into a large room. Fred carried me across this room and through a door into an office. There he set me down in a chair.

"Better bring a wheelchair," the doctor ordered. "He'll go upstairs, but it may be a few days before he can get around."

"Yes, sir," Fred answered quietly, then left.

"So you can remember," the doctor said musingly. "Tell me what you can remember, Mr. Risdon."

"The last I can remember," I said, my voice sounding old and unsure, "is at the pumping station where I worked. I was about to pull the disconnect for a synchronous motor. I can remember up to that point, and all before, but from that instant on my mind is a total blank."

"I see," the doctor said. "Tell me a little about yourself as you remember it."

"Well," I began, "I was an operating engineer in the water pumping station at Spokane. I was twenty-five years old—I gather I'm a lot older now. I had a nice house on north Washington Street. I had a wonderful wife—Martha. We had been married two years. I had been working for the city water department for three, under civil service. I owned a car—a brand new twenty-three Cadillac. That is, I was still making payments on it."

"That's sufficient, Kenneth," the doctor interrupted. "Your wife is dead now. This is the year nineteen sixty-three. Forty years are gone out of your life that can't be brought back."

"When did Martha die?" I asked. In the back of my mind there had been sudden relief—almost like there was some other woman. There was! NEOYA!

I masked my expression while I waited for the doctor's reply.

"Your wife died almost ten years ago, Mr. Risdon," the doctor said. "She visited you regularly right up to three weeks before her death."

I barely heard what he said. NEOYA. Her face rose in my mind—dark, almost negroid in color, yet beautiful and proud. Almost I could remember. Taracone. Neoya.

"We always wondered what had caused your amnesia," the doctor was saying. "You disappeared while at work. The other engineer missed you shortly after you shut off the motor, and when he could not find you any place he called the chief engineer. You were found three weeks later in Seattle. Dur-

ing the last forty years you have been here at the hospital. We've tried every method known to restore your memory. . . ."

Taracone — Neoya — and her beautiful face with its deep tan. Two fragile lifelines to the unknown. I clung to them desperately while I learned to walk again and eat again and dress again. I clung to them while I wandered among the flower beds and over the paths of the grounds of the state hospital.

I held Neoya's beautiful face before my mind's eye while I stared into space during sleepless nights in the new ward. I tried to reach out across the gap that separated me from all I KNEW to be the world I had lived in during my forty years of amnesia.

I spent hours in the hospital library. I borrowed a book from Dr. Robins on amnesia and tried to find some method of breaking down the barriers of lost memory.

Yet caution forbade me from mentioning these two mysterious names to the doctor. I had an instinctive feeling that he would not understand. He would tell me that during that forty years I had been myself, but that some sort of amnesia block divided the memories of those forty years from the previous period of my life, and that the only way to "get over" would be to forget what I now knew of my early life and become an amnesiac again.

As the days passed I grew convinced that in some way my amnesia had been caused by a freak field generated by the arcing of

that current at the disconnect. It had driven my ego from my body and into some other dimension or time or something, into a world where there was a country called Taracone and a girl named Neoya.

My body was now sixty-five years old, but my spirit was young and restless. It was only when I looked in a mirror that I fully realized my age.

The months passed. Winter came. I was forced to stay indoors. Slowly my thoughts grew bitter. I was imprisoned in a body that was of little use to me. My imprisonment was growing more and more intolerable. At my fingertips, or so I felt, were the keys that would unlock the doors to my return to a world where I was somebody.

Who was I in that world? Ken Risdon? I hardly thought so. It was a name that sounded something like that, though. Kan Risone? Kim Randone?

Relentlessly I drove my thoughts in a search for my lost life. Flashes would come, sometimes in the dead of night. I would awaken with the feeling that I had been back. But such feelings brought no tangible memory that I could cling to and add to the two keys I already possessed.

Neoya, my wife. Taracone, my homeland. I *knew* that, but I couldn't pull more than that from the well of memory.

Winter melted away with swift brush strokes of Nature's artistry. It seemed only moments in the timelessness of the hospital life before I was once more wandering

along the pathways of the grounds, the smell of growing things in my nostrils, the self-important twitterings of birds dotting the restful quietude.

I had grown reconciled to my lot as an old man with no more than a few years of life left to me. I could have left the hospital at any time and moved back to the city. My old age pension would take care of me on that. I had remained because I felt that here I would be taken care of and watched over, and have a chance to concentrate on trying to recapture my memories of the past forty years.

Now and then I picked up bits that told me of my life in the hospital during those years. Doctor Robins let me read my case history. From it I pieced together my life as an amnesiac. It told me nothing—or rather, it told me from the absence of any indications of irrationality or schizo traits that I had not been living a dream life.

There was no clue to Taracone in any of it. There was no clue to the life I felt in the depths of my being that I had been living, and living to the full, during the forty years of my "absence."

Then, one morning, while I was on one of my usual walks around the grounds, I became aware that someone was calling.

"Rolloken," the voice called from a great distance, and the way it called the "roll" was loud, while the rest trailed to inaudibility. The voice had been calling for some time before I was aware of it.

It was a woman's voice, rich,

tugging at my heart with its strange familiarness when I became aware of it. And I knew it was my name!

"Yes!" I answered in hoarse excitement. And as I answered I felt the invisible cord snap. The voice was gone. It had been my sudden excitement that had broken the contact.

But I now knew that my name was Rolloken. I had a third link—and a very important one. I didn't know the "how," the "where" or the "when" of things; but there was no longer any question in my mind about the objective reality of my existence during those forty missing years.

In some way, I knew, I would again contact them. I would return to the land, wherever it might be, in which my life lay, and once again forsake this aged body that imprisoned me.

I hardly considered it my own, or the personality that was embodied in it. I felt more like a stray visitor that had in some strange fashion landed in an empty seat in an alien vehicle. And now that I knew my name was Rolloken I immediately stopped thinking of myself as Ken Risdon. I might have been he, long ago. But for most of the years of my existence I had been Rolloken.

It was several days before I recaptured the feeling of peace and quiet that seemed necessary to my hearing Neoya's call. It came again in the same place, at the bend in the south path of the grounds where the clump of firs hides the path from the buildings.

I heard her sweet voice, and stilled my heartbeat to hear it better. I lay down on the grass at the side of the path and closed my eyes while I sent out my thoughts in answer.

A strange peace began to settle over me. Momentarily there was a wave of panic—the fear of Death—then once more the warmth of peace stole over me . . .

"By the Gods, Rolloken," Haben swore. "It's time you forsook your trance and returned to the world of men."

I grinned weakly at the giant of a man who stood spraddle-legged by my bed. Neoya stood anxiously in the background, wishing, but not daring to advance and let flow her emotions at the knowledge of my return.

"By the Gods I am a God myself now," I retorted. "A very feeble and decrepit one," I added, remembering my state in the vision. "But a God, nevertheless."

I strove to rise. A wave of pain bore me down again and I lay panting. I remembered now.

"The battle, Haben?" I asked between breaths.

He shrugged his huge tanned shoulders, his eyes sizing me up anxiously. I looked from him to Neoya and smiled at her tenderly. By the Gods, of which I was now one, I had missed her!

"Well," I said suddenly, turning back to Haben. "It won't remain a deadlock. I can read the Language and learn the secret of the God tombs. In fact, I know most of the secret already. Help me up

off this woman's snare and walk me until my legs gain their strength again."

The pains shot through me as Haben lifted me to my feet. I gritted my teeth and appreciated their firm solidity, but tears blinded my eyes.

"By the Gods, the Potion nearly killed me — I think," I groaned. "But the witch told me it would be that way. She said the only way I could accomplish my task would be to stand at the doorway of Death. Where is she now?"

"We thought she had killed you so we drove her out," Haben answered calmly. "No doubt the Others have found her by now and done what they always do—unless she had some secret curse to use in her defense."

"Hah!" I laughed mirthlessly. "Her secrets are mine too. I—"

I stopped as the blinding flash of memory struck me. My eyes turned in misery to Neoya. She was my wife. Yet now—the witch was Martha. And Martha was my wife too, though not in this life.

"Go bring back the witch," I ordered, shrugging free of Haben's protecting hold. "Bring her back or don't come back yourself."

His eyes studied me, appraising my twelve feet of height, my thick, broad chest. I could see in his eyes the realization that I meant what I said. Without a word he turned and left.

To his death? A twinge of regret caused my mouth to open as if to call him back; but I kept silent. Better to let him die than to permit Martha to be killed when I

needed her more than I had known. There was too much I needed to learn of my new knowledge. And she alone knew the secret of the time gate through which I had traveled to the past. I must gain that secret or it might be lost to me.

As Haben vanished through the opening, Neoya darted into my arms, holding me up with her feeble seven-foot body or I would have fallen where I stood.

I looked down at her affectionately.

"The Gods were little people," I said. "It was only their minds that were great. They could walk upright in the warrens above this room we live in. Even so, they could control the forces of nature with a twist of a wrist."

Neoya smiled bravely up at me. I bent to kiss her and lost my balance. We both fell to the cot where we lay in each other's arms, laughing at my clumsy weakness.

My thoughts sobered at the feel of her next to me. I looked into her soft brown eyes and felt her catch my mood. The one blight to our happiness often came between us this way. We had had many children, but they had invariably been Others, and we had had to drive them out when they became old enough to get along.

We should have killed them. The Others were getting too numerous. They would soon overwhelm us and exterminate us, but how could one kill his own flesh and blood?

Neoya was big now. Her litters were always numerous. It might be

that this time there would be one or two like us.

"How long have I been in the land of the Gods, Neoya?" I asked quietly.

"Ten days and ten nights as the witch promised," she answered.

"Ten days!" I marveled. "And there it was a Fall, a Winter and well into a Spring."

I thought of the aged body I had lain down on the grass at the side of the path and wondered pityingly if it had died. It had been so bewildered by my habitation—but then, I had also been bewildered. It had really been my own body at one time in the dim past or I could not have inhabited it. That was the Law. So the witch said, anyway.

But the witch was Martha, and Martha had been my wife in that past time before the Fall. She had preceded me in Death then. That was why she was older now. That too was the Law.

The Law was going out, slowly. That was why the Others were being born. That came from the Fall. We were no longer Gods except in form only—except for the witch and myself.

Yes, Martha was a God. I knew that now where I had not known it before. I would not have needed to go into the trance. She could have told me all I needed to know, had I but been able to listen to her.

Now, even with Neoya by my side on the cot, I yearned for Martha—wanted to look into her eyes and see if she knew what I knew.

"I am here, Rolloken." The

voice sounded from the entrance. It was the witch.

I turned my head and saw her standing there, her head held proudly erect. She was tall as I, a full ten feet; but her frame was thin from starvation. She swayed weakly, and remained erect only because of the firm hand of Haben on her arm.

His club was matted with hair and blood and dead flesh of the Others. I knew he had calmly advanced against all opposition of the Others. So few of them had minds to attack with.

They knew nothing except to cling and mew angrily, and bite with their sharp white teeth. They didn't even comprehend Death, but turned to devour their companions as quickly as they were slain, so that finally victory came from the retirement of the Others to dine on their slain kin, mewing sadly with the dim comprehension that their loved ones were different than in life.

"Martha!" I exclaimed with a glad cry, springing to my feet. My knees turned to water and I fell to the floor. I had forgotten my weakness for the moment.

I saw the fierce light glow in her sunken eyes and knew that she knew I remembered her. I saw that that had been the motive of her sorcery that had sent me back in time to what Taracone had been—America.

The word had changed—but no more than what it stood for. Tongues are habitual liars that distort the truth. Time is a liar that distorts the dreams of man

about his future.

The witch rushed forward in an impulse to catch me as I fell. Neoya, jealousy rising in her breast, rushed to intercept the witch. The witch herself could not stand alone, so weak she was. She fell, carrying Neoya with her.

Haben, annoyed at this display, slapped them both. Then I, with a burst of strength, rose to my feet and felled Haben with a blow, falling on him as he went down.

The four of us rolled over weakly, groaning, then looked at one another, soaking in the humor of the situation. Chuckling, Haben rose to his feet and assisted us to more suitable positions against the wall. There was silence while we gathered our strength. Then I turned my head to the witch, whose head was resting in her arms on her knees.

"Witch," I said. I thought a moment, then said, "Martha."

"Yes, Ken," she said without raising her head. Her voice was strangely different. It touched a memory deep in the roots of my soul that brought tears of gladness to my eyes.

"Why did you send me into the trance when you could have told me?" I asked.

"But I couldn't!" she exclaimed, raising her head abruptly. "That is, I could have told you some things you wouldn't have believed. Only a God could have believed. But aside from that, you had to go back. You see—" Her sunken chest rose as she drew in her breath. "I am not a God. Only the witch. I have never been in the trance. I

am—afraid. For you I had the courage to give you courage. But —although I know and remember the Gods as they were, it is only from dreams and visions and not from the trance. I CANNOT READ THE GOD LANGUAGE."

There was a deep silence, broken only by Neoya's crying. It was near her whelping, and the fall she had suffered had caused her trouble. I reached out and laid a comforting hand on her shoulder. Her sobbing quieted to a faint whimper.

"You have succeeded," the witch went on. "I know you have because you have the infinite knowledge to reach into my soul with a strange word and lift my spirit higher than it has ever been. Only a God could do that—though I know not how even then it can be done. Since you have become a God you can read the God language."

"Yes," I said dully. "I can read. That I must do, and can do. But—why did you call me Ken when you know my name is Rolloken?"

"I don't know," the witch said, confused. "Oh! Don't make me suffer! Don't! Don't! Don't!"

She rose as if attempting flight, then fell back, sobs shaking her starved body.

I looked at her dully, an ache rising in my heart. She didn't remember then. She didn't know she was my wife, who had visited me for thirty-eight years at the hospital, then died, a lonely old woman.

She didn't know. It was there, but hidden from her. Maybe it was the Law.

Little things came back. The

witch had watched over me since my childhood. I remembered times she had paused to give me a brief word of advice or comfort. I remembered what I had not thought about before—how it was her advice that had made me wise and powerful and the leader of Us.

Twelve years older than I, she had been my idea of a mate in my adolescence. She had fought me off—fiercely and successfully. I had turned from her in rage and taken Neoya as my mate.

I had often wondered why she had fought, when of all the possible mates I could have had she was the most friendly and seemed most likely to welcome me.

I saw now that that was the Law, too. It was the law of the Gods. But it was only the first Law. I could see that now as I watched her sitting against the wall, her head held weakly erect, her chin firm. I could see the Law working in her soul—as it was in mine.

Haben returned with an armload of mushrooms. He had gone up into the warrens and I had not even missed him! The sight of food made me realize that most of my remaining weakness was from hunger.

Immediately we were all eating and growing more cheerful by the minute.

Neoya's litter came during the night. It was too soon, and seven of them were dead; but of the remaining twelve, nine were of Us. Only three live Others! That was a miracle.

It was easy enough to tell. The Others had bulging heads that

were filled with mindless brains that could never learn more than the simple rudiments of animal living. It might be that in time they could have learned to speak in other than mews, but they seldom lived to grow up. Still, they were shaped like Us, and therefore not easy to kill without remorse.

Nine! I studied my young with fondness. They were mostly males. Already their large blue eyes were full of the light of an inner mind.

Half a dozen women were busily chatting and exclaiming over them. There would be more as the news traveled about. There would be no lack of women to give the youngsters the milk they needed to grow quickly—and those that survived would double in size in a few days. Right now they were each hardly larger than my doubled fist.

The witch was gone. Perhaps Neoya had told her to leave. She would be at her own building no doubt, mixing her potions and having her visions. Later, after I had basked in the admiration of the gathering people, I would go to her and talk. I could feel the Law still working in me.

Neoya called me with her eyes where she lay on the cot. I went over and knelt by the cot and stroked her hair, feeling clumsy. I knew how happy she must feel now.

She smiled up at me without speaking. There were teeth marks on her lower lip where she had bitten in during the night. But she was beautiful. I looked at her face and remembered how it had haunted me in my trance when it

floated before my eyes and I knew her name and knew she was my wife, but didn't know how or where or when.

I glanced up suddenly to find Haben standing beside me, a troubled look on his face. He was biting his lip while his eyes, a deep frown creasing between them, stared down at me.

Giving Neoya a final comforting pat on the head I stood up, my eyes questioning his. He turned and wove his way through the crowd of women, with me at his heels.

Outside, I needed no explanation. The sounds of the Others were loud, away from the incessant chatter of the women. Their mews and yip-yips, plaintive with the emotion of hunger, rose on all sides.

Several came into view a hundred yards away even as I emerged into the open. They were walking on all fours, upright, or scooting along with legs drawn up and stiff arms used as crutches — however the mood suited them.

As I studied them, not relishing the task ahead of me, several emerged from the opening to the dwelling place of the witch.

That could mean only one thing. Either she had been caught unaware and killed, or she was not there. I had to find out. Grabbing a club from beside the entrance I ordered Haben to stand guard, and dashed toward the advancing Others.

As always, their actions were the reverse of what they should be. Some vague reasoning told them

that my attack meant food. Many of them would die. That meant food for the rest. So they all advanced, not fearing to die because they could not comprehend individually that they might meet Death.

As I had done hundreds of times before since reaching manhood, I waded into them, wielding my club scythe fashion. I felt painful bites as an occasional Other slipped through and tried to bring me down.

Slowly I worked my way to the entrance to the witch's dwelling place, and entered.

"Marthal" I called anxiously. My cry mocked me with its echo, and the faint mews of the Others came from outside, punctuated by sharp yips of shrill females.

Something strange to my eyes but familiar to my memory attracted my attention. Scrawled in the dirt that covered the floor, but almost obliterated by the feet of the Others who had been here, was a written message!

The new God Power in my mind vibrated as my eyes traced the words.

"Ken," the message read. "I am going away. I cannot bear to remain, now that you know. I will go to the south. Please forget me."

It was in the God language. English.

"So she knew last night," I said softly to myself. After I had spoken I realized that I had used the God speech.

"To the south!" I cried wildly. "I won't let you go!"

As I dashed from the witch's

nome I sensed a strangeness growing in me. It had begun when I had read that scrawled message in the dust of the floor.

Something apart from me in my mind was calmly and impersonally studying things. It was cataloguing them according to the God knowledge. This area where I had been born was the ruins of a God city. The paths were streets.

I ran to the south, and the Others darted away from me, seeming to fear the new expression on my face. Martha had had — how many hours start? Would she be dead—eaten? Or would she have penetrated to what the fables said was a nucleus of Others who had minds, living to the south?

As I ran I was Ken Risdon, young once more, and with the memory of Martha strong in my mind. In a dozen blocks I had penetrated to territory where I had never been before.

The Others had disappeared from the streets before me. I saw them peering at me from second story windows; but though they had the faces of Others, a light of intelligence seemed to glow in their eyes.

I passed one of the God tombs in the center of the street, but had no time to pause. Its glittering tablet was there, with its God words. It was to read those words that I had permitted the witch to send me into the trance with her evil Potion.

Ahead I saw Martha stagger from the entrance of a building and collapse in the street. My feet possessed wings as I rushed for-

ward, heedless of danger.

I knelt beside Martha and felt for signs of life. My eyes shied away from the angry red of open wounds where she had been torn at by sharp teeth. Her face was deadly pale.

I reached out, my hand slow and careful, and touched her cheek. Her eyes opened and looked into mine. Her lips trembled in a smile.

"You shouldn't have done it, Martha," I said in a whisper.

She shook her head almost imperceptibly. Her thoughts seemed to flow into my mind in one smooth rush. She had gone south because to stay meant to break up my life and that of Neoya. In that other life she had watched over me for thirty-eight years while I didn't know her, or even myself. She had died alone. In this life she had watched over me again, with me not knowing who she was or who I was.

"It is the Law," she whispered tenderly.

"The Law?" I echoed. My eyes had glanced up and taken in the circle of Others advancing toward me, and the heavy clubs they carried. These were Others with minds such as my own.

"Yes," I answered my own question. "The Law. I will be with you again soon, Martha."

I sensed the spark of Life leave her even as I spoke. But there was no sadness in me—only a gladness and a desire for battle.

"Aayeel!" I roared, leaping up. With my club flailing I rushed a point on the advancing circle. I felt my club meet flesh that fell

away. I sensed the circle behind me rush forward.

I knew my only hope was to keep advancing faster than my foe could follow me, and my long legs could carry me much faster than they could travel.

Something struck my hip, paralyzing my right leg. I groaned at the certainty of defeat.

Suddenly, in front of me, a God tomb blocked my way. I knew I was lost. I knew that in another moment blows would rain on my back and head that would blot my life out.

A curiosity arose in me to learn what the God tomb had to say. I had gone into the witch's trance and gone into the past in order to be able to read what it said—and I must before I die.

I could, perhaps, have turned my back to the God tomb and braced myself against it and taken heavier toll of my enemies. Instead, I dropped my club at my side and read.

My God memory told me it was a stainless steel plaque imbedded in a concrete pedestal, rather than a God tomb. The Letters on it were raised.

"WARNING," it read. "This city is contaminated with U242, and will be unfit for habitation for fifteen thousand years. Decontamination is impossible. Exposure for more than forty-eight hours will result in gene mutation or sterility."

Underneath this warning was the letters, "M.A.E.P.: 1961."

The vaguely shaped white cloud

hovered before my eyes. Other clouds with strange shapes and colors floated in the distance but this particular cloud excited me in some way. It seemed special in some undefinable way.

I reached out toward it, trying to grasp it or at least see how far away it was. It darted to one side as I reached for it, but confidence surged in me. I knew it was close enough to reach. Laughing in triumph I reached again.

As my hand closed about the vague white cloud and held it, another sensation reached my mind from another place, and something in my mind clicked. What I held was not a cloud at all! It was my foot.

I looked up at the other cloud with its nice colors, floating beyond reach. I heard a gurgling sound well from my throat.

Strange memories in the background slipped fleetingly away. In their place came a confidence. A thought formed in my mind, and I accepted it without curiosity or wonder.

"This time things will work out," the thought said.

The gurgle of contentment sounded in my throat again, and I dropped my foot and held out my arms to that other cloud. I saw it drop closer. I heard sounds—familiar sounds.

"Is my baby happy because he has discovered his foot?" those sounds said.

The memories slipped completely away.

"Gludlah," I said. I had tried to say "Mama."



"Look!" exclaimed Sven Hedin. "What is that ahead of us?" He pointed into the swirling mist of spirals.

THE FATAL WORD

By GUSTAVUS MEYRINCK

Deep within Asia the power of the spoken word is greatly respected — for it is believed that what is uttered is a reality. Because of that belief, there are words that may not be said . . .

AUTHOR'S NOTE

There is a death-dealing word in this story. You may read it in your thoughts, but to pronounce it aloud may mean death. I warn you not to read this story aloud, or have it read to you aloud.—Gustavus Meyrinck.

. . .

(*Editor's note:* The amazing story presented here is from the pen of Gustavus Meyrinck, a Dutch Colonial author, and is based upon facts furnished to the writer by Sven Hedin, the famous explorer, when the latter had returned from one of his expeditions to inner Asia. Until the turn of the century, Sven Hedin was the first western man to penetrate the hidden reaches of Asia since the days of Marco Polo.)

1. Writing the Fatal Word

THE Tibetan sat in the sand and wrote the fatal word on a piece of parchment with infinite care. He placed two fingers on his mouth to enjoin silence and handed the parchment to Dr. Hedin.

He stood looking at the explorer for a while, re-counted his money,

then climbed on the back of his camel and rode slowly away. Just before vanishing in the woods that skirt the valley he turned once more and, as a last warning, placed his hand over his mouth.

The explorer consulted his Chinese dictionary and searched long and earnestly, but the word traced in picturesque hieroglyphics was not there. He called his Afghan servant, a fellow intrepid as a lion and suspicious as a witch.

"Dost think he spoke the truth?" asked Hedin.

"My lord," replied the servant, "he was a *Sannyasin*" (penitent); "the *Sannyasin* doesn't lie, nor would any disciple of Buddha, priest or layman, lie to him. And, moreover, he was on his way to Benares, there to worship in the holiest of holies. If cursed by 10,000

of the white man's devils, he wouldn't have told a lie, my lord!"

Dr. Hedin recalled how most words in the Chinese language have four or five different pronunciations and as many meanings. He took a handful of silver from his saddle-bag, offered it to the Afghan, and said: "It's thine if thou wilt teach me to accentuate the word properly."

For answer this battle scarred warrior took to his heels, running toward the grazing cattle. At a safe distance he stopped and, turning, cried out: "Swear by the God of the Christians, Lord, that thou wilt never demand sacrilege again from thy servant, nor commit it in his presence!"

His Afghan guide was as necessary an adjunct to the caravan as the ice gathered at the bottom of extinct rivers in the Desert of Gobi. Dr. Hedin pocketed his pride and went through the ceremony demanded of him by the guide. But in the dead of the night, when all were asleep save the master and Bjoernsen, his body servant, whom he brought from far away Norway, he told Bjoernsen all.

2. The Keepers of the Sacred Rites

Twenty days march from their camp, the Tibetan had said, in a secluded valley of the Tagh Mountains far from the caravan route, there lies—Hedin had marked the spot on his charts—the most mysterious kingdom of occult thought.

Buddha himself selected the territory which, like a natural tabernacle, hides from profane eyes the most sacred theatre of the rites of

the faithful.

Heaven-storming mountains, inaccessible because of their steepness and lack of vegetation, inclose this open air temple on three sides. The fourth side, ran the legend, is guarded by a zone of poisonous vapors rising from the ground without intermission and threatening instant death to every creature that attempts to pass.

The territory proper occupies some 50 square miles and is peopled by the tribe of the select. "It's the garden spot of the snow region of Asia," said the *Sannyasin*. "Trees and other large vegetable products, such as are denied to other portions of my country, grow here in abundance. Oranges and citrons ripen, the grapevine holds out promise of golden wine, bananas and sweet dates grow side by side. The air is soft, the sun shines brightly all the year round. There is no snow, no ice, no killing winds—it is a veritable paradise. Only 500 of God's elect inhabit this wonderland, among them 100 lamas, the rest beautiful women and happy children."

"A wonderland, indeed, for Tibet," cried Bjoernsen. "If the rascal spoke true."

Dr. Hedin continued: "He spoke the truth, I am convinced of it. The lamas of this secluded region observe the rites of a corrupted Buddhism. They observe a wicked, half-human, half-animal creature who appears at religious services in the disguise of a peacock, hung with precious stones and gold plate.

"This High Lama teaches Tibetans the secrets of black magic

—devices supposed to enable them to keep foreigners forever at a distance and eventually to conquer the whole of Asia with the prospect of ruling the universe.

"According to the Penitent," continued Dr. Hedin, "one of their forms of sorcery is to kill people by pronouncing within their hearing a certain magic word — they would die themselves if they heard the word of their own mouth."

Bjoernsen laughed. He had been with the explorer so long and had assimilated so much of the doctor's liberal religious thought, that he could see only the humorous side of the Penitent's story.

"Bridle your hilarity," said Hedin, assuming a severe air; "this is no nonsense but has a particle of truth in it. That particle we must discover—at the risk of our lives, if necessary. Are you with me in this adventure?"

Bjoernsen held out both hands. "With all my heart," he said. "I will never leave you."

"Hear my plan, then," continued the doctor. "Those divers' helmets with compressed air attachments we carry in the baggage for emergencies will help us over the poisonous zone. For the rest, we will trust to luck."

3. The Kingdom of Occult Thought

Three weeks' journey brought the caravan to the threshold of the mysterious valley—the zone of poisonous gases — which they had smelled when miles away. It filled the air with a strong acid smell. The Penitent had estimated the breadth of the zone at five miles,

and from what Dr. Hedin could see there seemed to be no reason for doubting his statement. The explorer made an attempt to enter the valley from the mountain side but found it impossible to do so.

From afar, the gas zone had all the characteristics of a desert. The ground appeared to consist of loose sand, torn by numerous small ravines. There were no traces of vegetation.

During the second night after their arrival Dr. Hedin gave the helmets a thorough trial. They worked to perfection and the explorer decided to risk the invasion on the morrow.

Both men started at sunbreak, Hedin, as usual, carrying his stenographic notebook and a map, with drawing material. Bjoernsen had a repeating rifle on his shoulder and a brace of marine pistols in his belt.

As they left camp the Afghan threw himself on the ground, embracing the doctor's knees. "Send me into a tiger's den," he shouted, "and I will have more chance to escape with my life than thou hast on this awful expedition."

The brass helmets shone in the red sun like pure gold and threw curious shadows on the ground from which the gases issued in tiny, bluish jets. The men walked ahead quickly, with long strides, for the doctor feared that the compressed air might give out if he had underestimated the distance to be traveled.

The explorer said afterward that he could not see straight while walking over the forbidden ground. The earth, the heavens and the

mountains danced and shifted about him like reeds swayed by the wind, and his vision was indefinite, as if obstructed by green waves of water. The sun itself looked like a sea-green body, and the "Roof of the World" towered above, a mountain range of green snow.

At last their feet touched grass and flowers—they had reached the promised wonderland. Bjoernsen was eager to shed his gas mask at once, but the doctor motioned him to desist. He wanted to find out first whether the air was fit for breathing. He lighted a half a dozen matches at short intervals, and, seeing that they burned brightly, at last threw off his awkward head-gear.

As they looked back at the route they had just trod, the wall of gas vapors bobbing up and down appeared like a bluish-white curtain. But the country ahead of them was Paradise indeed. Well-cared for, semi-tropical gardens alternated with small woodlands. There were sparkling rivulets and easy hills, garnished with roses and violets.

And high above smiled a Mediterranean sky, while the calm air was filled with the fragrance of orange blossoms and jasmine. Flowers everywhere — lilies and pinks and orchids grew larger and more varied in color than even in the botanical gardens of Martinique.

And such butterflies! The doctor hadn't seen the like of them in the most famous of world-famed collections! Some were as large as a hand and their wings most curious-

ly embroidered in brilliant colors.

After walking a mile inland they espied, not far away, what seemed like the beginning of a vast forest. Dr. Hedin motioned the servant to give him one of the pistols. Then they marched bravely ahead.

They had no sooner reached the first clump of trees than they saw human beings, perhaps a quarter of a mile off, standing in the center of a large, round clearing.

Their features characterized them as Tibetans, their dress as lamas. They were clad in sheepskins and wore on their heads large scarlet sugar-loaf hats with gold embroidery.

From their actions Dr. Hedin concluded that they had observed him and Bjoernsen and were preparing to meet them. There were probably a hundred of the natives, and each seemed more repulsive than the other. In all his Asiatic travels the explorer had never seen such shapeless, disproportionate heads, such swollen, uncouth faces.

The lamas watched the two strangers, allowing them to approach within hailing distance. Then suddenly the lamas raised their hands to their ears and shouted with all their might.

4. How Hedin Was Saved

Dr. Hedin turned to Bjoernsen for an explanation. The doctor was stone deaf but readily understood the conversation of his companion from the motion of his lips. However, he was unacquainted with the Tibetan language and could gather no clue to the meaning of the savage cry.

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Bjoernsen stood erect, with rifle pressed against his cheek, as if expecting an attack, but this brave picture Dr. Hedin beheld only for an instant.

As the lamas continued shouting, Bjoernsen's body became enveloped in bluish clouds, like those through which the explorers had passed at the threshold of this Kingdom of Occult Thought.

With the utmost horror, and while himself unable to move a limb, the doctor saw his companion melt into a shapeless mass. The outlines of Bjoernsen's body loosened, his fine old Scandinavian head took the form of an elongated cone, his body broadened and then collapsed. Within five seconds the sturdy Norseman had changed into a cone, no bigger than an ordinary sugar-loaf.

This cone was of light violet color and looked like a mass of gelatine.

Dr. Hedin now faced the lamas. They were still shouting, and he felt instinctively that they were repeating a certain word. Seeing him undaunted and unharmed by the shower of cabalistic lingo, they were seized with frenzy. They jumped about in a wild dance and appeared to be addressing questions from one to another.

Suddenly the chief lama, recognizable by his elaborate headgear, stepped forward and raised his left hand. They all dropped their hands from their ears and listened. He shouted something that Hedin took for words of command, and the next moment they advanced upon the doctor with all the fury

of enraged leopards. Hedin opened fire with his revolver.

He saw three or four of the fanatics tumble over. But his weapon would soon be empty and there was no time for reloading. What then?

The death-dealing word that the Penitent had written down for him raced into Hedin's mind at this crucial instant. "Ammalaul!" he cried and repeated, and "Am-malaul!" he cried again.

As he did so with all the power at his command — he said afterward he thought he heard himself — his senses gave way and his brain reeled.

But this feeling of unsteadiness lasted only a few moments. By a tremendous effort of his will he recovered himself, to face the enemy anew.

When he raised his eyes the Tibetans were no more. Instead he observed numerous violet cones standing and lying all about him.

Only the chief lama still had breath in him, and his legs were giving way, turning into a violet mass and the upper part of his body was collapsing.

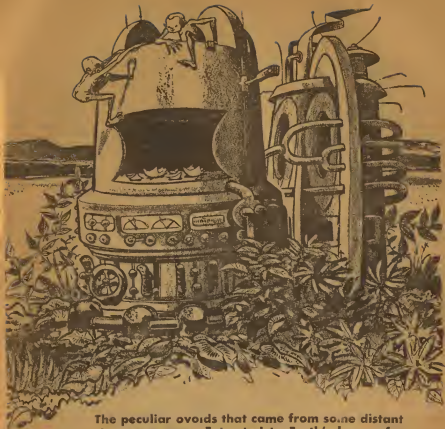
Hedin watched in horror as the lama dissolved before him. Then turning his back upon the accursed valley he retraced his steps, donning his helmet and hastening through the veil of gasses. His heart heavy with the loss of Bjoernsen, he returned to camp and ordered his caravan to get underway immediately. He never returned to that oasis of death among the mountains.

TO GIVE THEM WELCOME

by MELVA ROGERS



"Oh! Aren't they cute!" she exclaimed, and lifted her arms toward them in welcome.



The peculiar ovoids that came from some distant star were eggs. Entrusted to Earth's bosom for a welcome, they raised a vital question: should they be "adopted," or should they be destroyed?

DAVE BURSS stuck a sheet of paper into his portable and paused, frowning. What could he say? After all, nothing had taken place yet. He grinned at the recollection of a bit of advice that had been given him by a reporter when he had been a cub: when you have nothing to report, dramatize it.

Well, there was nothing to report, and all the front page space he wanted to report it in. His fingers became a blur as the words flowed out of them . . .

The suspense that has gripped the world during the past three years since Dr. Marblow first discovered what he thought to be a

new satellite of Jupiter, only to have it get lost and show up as a satellite of Neptune, has been distilled and redistilled until its very essence has settled on the little group of astronomers, television technicians, and reporters gathered here at Palomar. It can be seen in the nervous twitch of face muscles as tense scientists check and recheck their telescope in preparation for those crucial twenty-seven seconds during which the object will be in view.

It can be heard in the low spoken words of the two radio announcers as they describe what is going on here. It can be seen in the quick, jerky movements of the television "eye men" as they make test shots.

Dr. Marblow told me earlier this morning that the Schmidt telescope will bring the strange visitor so "close" that it will be as though it were speeding by a mere five thousand feet off the ground. For the first time it will be as visible in detail as that commercial airliner that passes over you so often that you seldom bother to look up.

It will not be as steady or clear cut as that airliner, however. Dr. Marblow says that slight convection currents in the atmosphere will cause it to jump around and distort, and that the best we can hope for is perhaps one or two isolated instants during which it will appear stationary and stand out.

Is it a space ship—an interstellar visitor with intelligent creatures on board? Or is it, as some

scientists have asserted, a bit of cosmic matter that is attracted to a planet by gravity and then repelled as it takes on an electric charge similar to that of the attracting body, only to lose the charge when it is out in space again and be attracted to the next planet?

In only a few hours now we will know, if luck is with us. Chance is the one factor the technicians can't tinker with. A wisp of filmy cloud, a sudden change in temperature in the atmosphere anywhere along the line of sight, can bring all these carefully laid plans to nothing.

In addition, there is no way of knowing whether the cosmic wanderer will behave according to predictions. It may already be speeding away from Earth toward Venus.

Suspense. There has never been anything to equal this. The Kathy Fiscus rescue attempt back in 1949 is the only thing I can think of that approached this in suspense. There, the element of suspense had more of the individual appeal. A little girl was trapped in a pipe, deep in the Earth. Men risked their lives, working against time in the hope that she still lived.

The suspense that grips the world today is as cosmic as this mysterious visitor about which it centers. It strikes at the very foundations of religion and human existence. Most of the modern religious beliefs can encompass the actuality of a race of non-human beings—if such there are. But

some cannot. What will the leaders of those religions do if they are confronted with alien creatures—either friendly or hostile—who are our equals or superiors, and who perhaps have a religion of their own?

The religious aspects of this drama, however, are minor and of importance only to the individual. The leaders of nations are waiting at their television sets to find out if this visitor has weapons and instruments that may, perhaps, have to be coped with in battle; weapons whose principles are not even known to modern science.

The leaders of industry are waiting at their radios to learn of new things that might revolutionize industry. Assuming for the moment that this mysterious visitor is a space ship, does it have refrigerators on board that work on a new principle that will make obsolete all the millions of dollars worth of machine tools and dies that are used to manufacture the refrigerators you buy today? Are there power units that will make obsolete all the thousands of miles of wires distributing electric power all over the nation?

Biologists are waiting to find the answers to questions. Assuming there are intelligent creatures on this cosmic wanderer, are they vegetable or animal — *or something else?*

Yes. All the world waits, and watches, with questions waiting to be answered. Questions that will be answered in a few hours which may be the beginning of a new age for mankind. Suspense. Sus-

pense that has been building up for three years. Suspense that has stilled the wheels of industry while all men wait—and watch.

Dave Burss hastily read over what he had written, added the date, May 7, 1963, then stood up and hurried over to the teletype operator in the telegraph office that had been set up at the observatory in hasty preparation for this great event.

After that he took the elevator to the ground floor where a lunch room was doing a rushing business.

"Hi, Dave."

Dave paused in the act of ordering a cheese sandwich and cup of black coffee, turned his head, and smiled a welcome toward the cheery, feminine voice.

"Hi, Jenny," he said. "How's my competitor? Hungry?"

"As usual," Jennifer Grant answered, wrinkling her nose speculatively at the assortment of food on display behind the cafeteria counter.

Dave watched her, an indulgent smile on his lips. He admired the impudence in her personality—except when she beat him to some scoop as she often did. Then her air of impudence irked him.

His "secret" desire was to chain her to a kitchen stove, and he knew that she knew it. He didn't like her unpermanented straight brown thatch of boyishly trimmed hair. He didn't like the mannish business suits she always wore; they flattened her chest and de-

stroyed her curves. He didn't like the fearlessness with which she looked up at him from her five-feet-two which she made no attempt to offset by wearing high heels. He didn't like her quick mind that as often as not could outguess him in pursuit of a news story. Yet, taken all together—

He sighed and planted the cheese sandwich on his tray. He slid the tray along the counter to the coffee urn. Jennifer accidentally stepped on his heels and said "Pardon me, sir," and grinned at him.

At the cash register he paid his own check, looked annoyed when Jennifer paid her own and wished he had offered to treat.

They found a table over by a window looking out onto the highway that wound down the mountainside in graceful swoops. Jennifer ate in subdued silence as if waiting for him to speak. That was another thing he didn't like: her mixture of impudence and subdued you-are-the-master, milord way of treating him, whose mockery was too subtle. Sometimes he had a sneaking hunch she would marry some guy he had never heard of and he would have to spend the rest of his life missing her irritating ways.

"Nice view," he murmured through his sandwich.

She flashed him a smile and sank her even white teeth into her own sandwich with that indifferent gracefulness that characterized most of her actions. Dave turned his eyes back to the scenery by an effort of will.

"Dave . . ." Jennifer said five minutes later, breaking the comfortable silence.

Dave looked quickly at her. There was something in her voice he hadn't heard before.

"I have a hunch about all this," she said. She studied her coffee for a minute, indecision on her face. "Would you be open to a proposition?"

He opened his mouth to make a facetious comeback, then paused without speaking. Jennifer's eyes were serious.

"Look, Dave," she said, leaning forward, her elbows on the table. "I'll lay one of my cards on the table and give you a chance to play on it."

"Don't do it," he said. "I'll take it and use it in my own hand. We play dirty—remember?"

"I'm playing dirty," Jennifer said, her face humorously serious. "I want to use you and double-cross you. You can get a scoop out of it only by thinking faster than me. But maybe you're afraid to match wits with me on a pig in the poke?"

She lifted her cup nonchalantly to her lips and looked at him with wide eyes over the rim.

"Shoot," Dave said, leaning abruptly forward.

Jennifer sputtered, spilling coffee on her blouse. She set the cup down and glared at Dave accusingly.

"I believe you did that deliberately."

"You're jittery," Dave said, grinning. "That means those evil little wheels in your head are going

around again. What are they grinding out?"

"I've decided not to tell you," she said, sticking her tongue out at him. She stood up and walked toward the door. She reached it, Dave watching her, then paused. Turning, she came back and sat down.

Dave said nothing, waiting for her to speak.

"Make me a promise, Dave," she said finally. "Promise that you'll string along with me on what I have in mind until it's over. In return I'll promise to play fair with you."

"If that's a marriage proposition I'll promise," Dave grinned. "Otherwise, I'll have to hear the proposition first."

"Promise!" Jennifer demanded, her face serious.

"Now listen, Pete," Dave said earnestly. "This is big. We've got to take the chance. Sure it'll cost money. Plenty."

"Money?" the editor's voice sounded explosively over the long distance phone. "Look. I'll give you a ten-dollar raise. You aren't worth it; but that will be only five-hundred and twenty a year, five-thousand two-hundred in ten years, which is long enough for you to last before you burn out your brain. Only forget about this scheme."

"If it pays off you'll give me twenty a week raise and be glad to do it," Dave countered.

"How can it?" Pete Scofield moaned. "With the whole wide world wide open, how could you

hope to find him—it?"

"Her, maybe," Dave said, grinning at the phone.

"Yeah," Pete said dryly. "With eight arms and scales on her head. You can have her."

"Well, look," Dave changed the subject. "The stuff I could pick up by staying here you can get over the radio just as well, maybe better. All I'm asking is your permission to drop the observatory angle and hire a fast jet plane. I'll go to the Tulsa airport so as to be centrally located."

"Okay," Pete Scofield groaned his consent. "Only, if this doesn't pay off—"

"It will," Dave said.

"It had better!"

There was a loud click.

Dave grimaced at the dead phone and left the booth. A minute later Jennifer appeared from another booth. She smiled nervously at him and nodded her head. He nodded his.

"We can leave one of the rented cars here and drive to the airport together," he suggested. "We've got to make sure our pilots can contact each other constantly, so that we are in together on whatever shows up."

"Come on," Jenny said impatiently. "It might happen before we even get started."

"It might," Dave admitted, pushing the door open and letting Jenny precede him as they hastened to the parking lot. "But my guess is that your hunch is correct. If that is a space ship, it must have radio, and probably knows the Schmidt telescope will be

trained on it in a few hours. If it wants to drop something or one of its crew for us to find, it will do it while we can see it happening. Don't worry. With me at the Tulsa airport and you at the Las Vegas one, at least one of us will stand a good chance of intercepting whatever is dropped, and following it down."

"No doublecross, now," Jenny said nervously.

"Look who's talking," Dave snorted. He climbed behind the wheel of the car and waited for Jenny to get seated. As he nosed out onto the highway he added: "Even if there's a doublecross, one of us should come out of this with a big enough salary increase so we can afford to—you know."

Jennifer didn't take the bait. As Dave guided the car down the twisting highway he wondered if she hadn't bit because she wasn't interested—or because she was.

Dave was quite pale as he jerked the lever that let him tumble backward out of the plane. His eyes were shut tight. The snap of the pilot chute was audible above the rush of wind. Then, just as he began to wonder if the main chute would pull out, he felt a jerk and a dizzying sensation.

He dared to open his eyes and see the Earth rocking lazily below him—too far below. He closed his eyes again and swallowed, then opened them and looked around.

The pilot of the plane had estimated right: the alien spot of white was just a few hundred yards away and at the same alti-

tude.

The tingling surprise over Jennifer's lucky hunch returned. It was uncanny! It had been wrong in only one respect. The object—whatever it was—had been dropped before the Schmidt telescope was turned on it, but in such a way that it would be still in sight. When the image of the alien ship had come into focus through the telescope there had been a plainly visible object also in the image, hurtling earthward.

Dave's eyes jerked to the western horizon. Another jet plane was there, rapidly approaching. Either it was Jenny, or . . . The two way radio strapped to Dave's chest came to life.

"It's me, Dave," Jenny's voice sounded, tense. "I'm going to parachute too."

"Better stay in your plane," Dave cautioned.

"And have you be the first to see what's on that chute?" Jenny said incredulously. "Don't be silly! Anyway," her voice took on pseudodramatic tones, "if you are to die I want to die with you, my love."

"Then who would write my obituary?" Dave asked.

He forgot Jenny for a few minutes while he experimented with maneuvering his parachute closer to the alien one. Below were checkerboard fields, some green, others almost black from plowed soil. Scattered within the circle of the horizon were several towns, each several miles apart. A river, a tortuous double line of green separated by a line of muddy gray,

roamed from horizon to horizon, callously ruining the geometric pattern of the fields. Small bugs scurried along the heavy lines between squares, apparently oblivious of what lurked above them in the sky.

Dave caught the knack of guiding his parachute and confidently drew close to the other chute. Hanging from it was a bulky object which might be a living thing, or a piece of equipment.

He gulped as he thought of the atom bombs dropped on Japan by parachute. This might be something similar. If it were— But that would be senseless.

He waved an arm violently in the hopes that if the object were alive it would answer his wave. It remained passively inert, dropping slowly toward the general vicinity of the river.

Dave looked around to see where Jenny's plane was and discovered her not far away, hanging from her parachute. She waved cheerily at him.

"Hellol" her voice sounded strangely loud.

"Hellol" Dave answered happily. "It didn't occur to me we could talk together up here!"

"Is it alive?" Jenny called.

"I don't think so. I think it's an atom bomb. My geiger counter is running like mad."

He had the satisfaction of seeing Jenny's chute sideslip rapidly away for a moment.

"You beast," she said. "I wish you *had* a counter, though. It might *be* an atom bomb."

The trees along the bank of the

river were growing swiftly larger now. Dave shied away from the alien chute. The breeze was going to carry it into the trees. At the last minute he tried to get closer to Jenny. Then he was on the ground, struggling to keep the wind from dragging him.

Accidentally his hands jerked the strings in the proper way to collapse the chute. He grunted his satisfaction as the dragging force ended.

Hastily freeing himself of the harness, he ran to help Jenny, who was not being as lucky as he had been. He succeeded in freeing her. Taking her hand, he ran toward the alien chute which was dangling from a limb of a tree, its mysterious cargo barely clearing the ground.

They reached it together, panting from exertion, their feet hurting from the dirt that had gotten into their shoes from the field of green wheat. They stopped a few feet away cautiously examining it.

It was a dull brown canvas-like material, covering something that could be no more than the size of two medium pieces of luggage, and about the same shape.

Dave discovered the line of a zipper. He stepped up, eagerly looked for the fastener, and unzipped it. The covering fell away to reveal two cases.

"Just as I suspected it would be," Jenny said almost in a whisper. "A wire recorder—or its equivalent."

"I suspected it too," Dave said. "Let's get them loose and hide before some farmer comes nosing

around. We want to find out just what gives before we have visitors."

"Right," Jennifer said breathlessly.

Five minutes later, in the protection of bushes lining the shore of the river, Dave lifted the cover of the larger of the two cases.

Revealed was something that seemed almost conventional, so much in the pattern of manufactured electronic devices of the Earth it appeared. It was obviously a wire recorder, but with one major difference: there was also a television screen.

"Where are the spools?" Jennifer asked.

"In the other case, you dope," Dave said. He let her open the other case by herself while he carefully studied the operation of the thing.

"Look, Dave," Jenny's voice interrupted his study. "The spools have two wires on them instead of one."

Dave turned his eyes to the other case. There were eight large spools of fine wire. He took the one Jenny had in her hands and examined it.

It had the number 1 engraved on its side. He checked with the others and discovered they each had digits on them in a system of counting that would be obvious to any type of intelligent being. They were marked 1, 11, 111, and so on.

"That's the order they want us to play them in," he muttered. "This one's obviously the one they

want us to try first."

He examined the spool more closely. It was in reality two spools fastened together on a hollow shaft. One spool contained several times more wire than the other. The two spools were loose against each other so that one could turn at a different speed than the other.

"Look, Jenny," Dave said, pointing this out. "One of these is the image wire and the other is the sound wire. I'll bet they're fixed so the spool will only go on one way. Let's try it."

"Do we dare?" Jennifer breathed. "If we ruin things we'll be in plenty hot water with everybody."

"There's no law against us doing it," Dave grinned nervously.

"They may have just passed one," Jenny said. "If they did, let's break it."

"There are two pickup grooves," Dave pointed out. "The bottom one has the widest play, so that must be the television pickup."

He slid the spool on the shaft where it belonged and strung the two fine wires to the empty spools already in the machine. Then, cautiously, he turned a knob.

"Oh, Dave," Jenny groaned, as the spool spun rapidly and the wires came loose.

"That was the rewind," Dave said nervously. "Maybe I'd better experiment with the controls before risking the spool."

He took it off and played with one control after another. Some of them produced no detectable effect. The two that controlled the turning of the spools were located, however.

Again he hooked in the two fine wires, his fingers trembling with excitement and nervousness. When they were securely in place he turned the switch that ran the spools forward. One ran slowly, the other swiftly.

Nothing happened.

"Quick, Dave," Jenny said tensely. "You may be erasing what's on the wire!"

"God!" Dave groaned, his fingers poised in indecision.

He pressed a button that hadn't done anything while the machine was idle. Immediately sound exploded from the instrument. It was a voice — a deep baritone — uttering what were obviously words.

"The image," Jenny said tensely. "Get the image going."

Dave pressed another button, next to the one that had turned on the sound. The screen came to life.

On it appeared a succession of things, each remaining several seconds. While it was being shown, the baritone voice uttered a succession of sounds.

"That's teaching us the language," Jenny said. "What we want is a spool showing us what they're like."

"Yes," Dave said. "That's all we dare take time for. We ought to tell the pilots to get a car started out here for us right away. Probably the whole world knows by now that we have grabbed the prize."

"I'll contact the pilots," Jenny said. "You take that spool off and try number eight. That should

have what we want."

"Right," Dave agreed. He worked swiftly, intently. The spools were changed.

"The pilot says a cavalcade is already on its way," Jenny said as he started the new spools. "They should be here in a few minutes."

The alien voice spoke again. It was a minute before the screen lit up. A series of maplike animated pictures were all that appeared. They showed first a map of the United States which suddenly acquired a heavy X covering the Mojave Desert.

Next the map grew until only the marked spot was in the screen. A circle grew around the X. In the circle appeared buildings and green coloring.

"Still nobody," Dave groaned.

"Hello!" A chorus of voices sounded above the baritone sounds from the recorder.

"There's the cavalcade," Jenny said. "What'll we do?"

"There's only one thing to do," Dave said, reversing the spools. "We'll have to wait and see what those guys look like along with everybody else. Maybe they don't even let themselves be seen on *any* of the spools."

"That's possible," Jennifer said thoughtfully. "You put things together while I go tell them where we are. Keep quiet until I call. It might be just some local citizens instead of the car to take us to town."

"Okay," Dave agreed.

Pete Scofield smiled at Dave. His smile was dripping sweet. It

was an expression like a man would have while eating an unripe lemon loaded with sugar. The cigar held between fingers of his right hand lost its shape as those fingers unconsciously gripped it like it might be someone's neck.

"Ha ha. Hello Pete," Dave said nervously, closing the door on the grinning faces of the outer office staff.

"You are to be congratulated," Pete said softly. "I saw the television. It showed you with the two cases, entering the airforce plane on your way to Washington."

"Oh, did you?" Dave said, surprised. "I didn't know it had been televised."

"I saw you walk into the White House, surrounded by soldiers, the least of whom seemed to be an adjutant general," Pete went on, his voice flowing honey. "I saw the President take the two cases from your hands — over the television, of course."

"Yeah. Ha ha," Dave said nervously. "Quite a boost for the paper, wasn't it?"

"The paper?" Pete asked with an air of surprised incomprehension. "What paper? Don't you work for me anymore? What's wrong with us? You're on our payroll — and aren't all your paychecks signed by old man Scofield, editor of that sedate, respectable, mature, monthly, ancient-history publication, so naively misnamed the—" his voice suddenly became an insane screech — "the DAILY BLADE!" He inhaled gallons of air. "WHAT HAPPENED TO

YOUR SCOOP? DID YOU MAIL IT PARCEL POST TO SAVE POSTAGE?"

Dave flushed, the memory of those two hours of hiding while Jenny got a ride to the nearest town and wired in the scoop still rankled in his mind.

Pete Scofield jerked a fresh cigar from his shirt pocket and lit it, the flame from his lighter seeming feeble compared to the fire in his eyes as he glared past the cigar at Dave. He puffed fiercely on the cigar several times. Then suddenly a politely contrite expression altered his features.

"But forgive me, Mr. Burss," he said contritely. "I shouldn't be talking that way to one who might conceivably be a customer sometime. I should only talk that way to my employees, not *ex* employees."

"You mean I don't work for you anymore?" Dave asked. Pete nodded with grim finality.

"Well," Dave said, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "In that case I guess I'll sell what the President and I discussed behind closed doors to the CLARION."

"Behind closed doors?" Pete exclaimed. "What—?" He made a supreme effort to conceal his eagerness. "What I mean is, if you have some reasonable excuse for not fulfilling your assignment, I will be more than glad to let you stay on, even at your old salary. I'm a fair man."

"You fired me. Remember?" Dave said. "But, being a free lance now, I suppose I could deal with

my old boss as well as the CLARION, if he paid enough."

Scofield glared at Dave, then slowly relaxed.

"So I went off half cocked," he said. "Forget it. I guessed when I saw the scoop in the CLARION that Jenny had teamed up with you on this, and doublecrossed you, I couldn't understand how you would let her get away with it. Now I know. You were doublecrossing her, too. Right?"

"Could be," Dave said with cool indifference. "But don't change the subject. What I want to know is what you'll offer for what I have. Or are you interested?"

"What do you think you want?" Pete Scofield asked suspiciously.

"A five-hundred-dollar bonus and a ten-dollar raise," Dave said, calmly lighting a cigaret and blowing smoke at the ceiling. He glanced down in time to see the second cigar crumble under the pressure of constricting fingers.

There was total silence as the two men watched each other. Finally it was Scofield who broke. He turned without a word, and bent over his desk, scribbling on a pad. When he finished he tore off the sheet and handed it to Dave. It was an order to the cashier to pay the bonus and enter the raise on the payroll books.

"All right," he said. "What've you got?"

"There was a secret compartment in one of those cases," Dave said. "In it were — two of the aliens."

concealing her dripping form, fresh from an interrupted shower, scurried from the bathroom across the bedroom to the jingling phone.

"Hello," she said brightly. "Oh! Hello, darling." Her voice was mocking. "So glad to hear from you, Dave . . . Dinner at Francois? I'd love to . . . Be down in fifteen minutes. I'm just out of the shower."

"Okay. I'll see you in fifteen— maybe twenty minutes."

It was thirty-five minutes. Dave grabbed her arm and whisked her into the cab that had been waiting at the curb with merrily clocking meter.

"Why the rush?" Jenny gasped as the cab pulled into the street. "Oh. Now that you're unemployed, the extra fare for a waiting cab— I'm sorry, Dave. You didn't get fired, I hope?"

There was genuine concern on her face.

"Yes," Dave said, sighing deeply. "Oh, I don't hold it against you, Jenny. All is fair in war, and you warned me, remember. But, do you think, that is, would you put in a good word for me with your boss, if I hit him up for a job?"

"That was positively mean of Scofield to fire you," Jenny said angrily. "I'll put in a good word for you, Dave. In fact, if he doesn't hire you I'll quit."

"But you couldn't," Dave said, alarmed. "One of us, that is, I thought newspaper work was your main interest in life?"

"If only one of us is to work it

Jennifer Grant, a bathrobe half

will be you," Jenny said decisively. "If I quit, my boss will need the best to take my place. He'll have to hire you."

A strange light was growing in Dave's eyes.

"You mean," he said, turning in the seat and facing her squarely, "That you'd quit and marry me and settle down?"

"Yes, Dave," Jenny said. "I'd have done so long ago, but it was so much fun trying to outsmart you."

"Darling!" Dave exclaimed.

Jenny crept into his arms and snuggled her head against his shoulder.

"I'm so glad it's over," she murmured. "For so long I've wanted just to be your wife and darn your sox for you."

She shifted uncomfortably, drew away from him.

"What's this?" she asked, reaching inside his coat and extracting a folded newspaper.

"That's just an old paper," he said, making a grab for it.

Jenny eluded his fingers and opened the paper to reveal the red EXTRA across the top, and under it the headlines TWO ALIENS ON EARTH.

"You deceiver!" she gasped hoarsely. Her eyes took in the name of the paper, DAILY BUGLE, and Dave's byline at the top of the column.

She gasped when she reached the part that said: "I noticed the fine lines of two secret doors in the side of the larger case. I opened them at the first opportunity and found them to be two

cylindrical tubes, warm to the touch. A soft ticking sound came from each, and through a transparent window in each I saw what appeared to be an egg."

"So you knew about those secret doors while I was still there and just waited until I left to find out what was in them," she said accusingly. "Oh! I never want to see you again as long as I live. Driver, stop the cab."

Against Dave's protests the cab pulled to the curb and Jenny got out. She slammed the door and walked stiffly down the street. Dave fumbled with his billfold, paid the driver and hurried after her, catching up with her at the corner.

As he reached her a CLARION truck pulled up at the corner and dislodged a paper boy, his arms loaded down.

"Waxtral!" the boy was shouting as his shoes hit the pavement. "SPACE SHIP DEPARTS!"

Dave grabbed a paper and tossed the boy a coin. Jenny, forgetting that she never intended to have anything to do with Dave again as long as she lived, crowded against his shoulder to read it with him.

The paper carried an International News Service special release. Five different amateur astronomers in Australia and India had reported that the space ship was now leaving the vicinity of the Earth so rapidly that it would be well past the Moon's orbit before it would be visible through telescopes in America again.

Dave and Jenny finished the

article at the same time. They looked at each other, dumb-founded.

"Well, why won't you marry me?" Dave asked defiantly. "You said in the taxi that you wanted to."

"You got that out of me by trickery," Jenny said. "Maybe I meant it and maybe I didn't; but I'm not going to quit my job and marry you, so just stop harping on the subject."

"I'm not harping," Dave said. "But good Lord, Jenny, what is there left in the newspaper reporting business? What are fires and scandals and such tripe after the triumph of intercepting that parachute from the space ship? Why not quit while you're at the top of your career as a reporter and start your real career?"

"You just don't understand," Jenny replied. "It would be like, well, like being licked into it. You tricked me. I couldn't give in just on account of the trickery."

"I guess I don't understand women," Dave said angrily. "You love me. You want to marry me. But you won't marry me because I found out you want to. Huh!"

They paused in their slow strolling to watch the television in a radio store window.

On the television screen were the two cylinders Dave had discovered in the secret compartments of one of the cases dropped from the space ship. The two alien eggs could be seen inside their transparent windows. The sound of a loud dual ticking came from

the radio loudspeaker. A voice came on.

"You are hearing the ticking from a hidden mechanism inside these strange cylinders," the voice said. "Ticking whose meaning may be innocent—or sinister. We *hope* that that ticking is innocent; but the President and his scientist advisers are taking no chances.

"The two cylinders that you see are on a radio controlled ship well out in the ocean. There are no living persons within a hundred miles of them. The scientists themselves see no more than we bring to you over television. Even though it is practically certain that such precautions are not necessary, they are taken.

"However, the expert opinion of the scientists is that those two eggs will actually hatch, and from them will emerge two newborn members of the race aboard that mysterious ship from Outside.

"Why did the ship leave after dropping these two eggs? We don't know. We can't even hazard a guess. The world's greatest linguists are working night and day on the messages contained in the spools of the wire recorder that was dropped with the two eggs. Almost any hour they will have completed their deciphering of the message on those spools.

"Then, perhaps, we will know more about what to do when these eggs hatch. Stay tuned to this station. At any hour, any second, the shell of one of these eggs may crack, and an alien snout—or beak—will poke through. If you stay tuned you will be one of the

lucky ones to see this historical event.

"And speaking of lucky ones, are you one of those lucky ones who have had their Wheaties this morning?"

Dave and Jenny moved on, walking in silence. Two blocks and ten minutes later Dave sighed.

"Two solid weeks," he said. "Two weeks of ticking—and still nothing happens. There was a hotel fire on the South Side this morning. Five people died in it. What happens? It gets a side column, cut off and continued on page five. And I have to write two solid front page columns of repetition about the eggs! *That* gets the center spread."

"Me too," Jenny said, hooking her arm in Dave's with a tired sigh. "Let's have a hamburger."

They turned into the hamburger stand they had been about to pass. Jenny rested her elbows on the counter and cupped her chin on her fists.

"Two hamburgers and two coffees," Dave said. "Oh, hello, Joe. Working kind of late tonight aren't you?"

"Yeah," the waiter said. "Oh, say. Did the paper get you? They called here half an hour ago looking for you."

"No," Dave said, already rising and reaching in his pocket for a nickel to phone. A minute later he came back. "Cancel one of those hamburgers, Joe," he said. "See you later, Jenny. Gotta dash."

"Cancel the other one too, Joe," Jenny said, coming to life and following Dave out the door.

Dave walked slowly out of the DAILY BUGLE office and across the sidewalk to the waiting taxi. Jenny's face was a white blob behind the glass of the door as she studied his face, trying to get some clue from it as to what had taken place.

He opened the door and slid in beside her, giving the driver the address of his apartment.

"What happened, Dave?" Jenny asked.

He looked at her as if discovering her for the first time. A slight compression of his lips was the only change of expression as he turned his eyes forward again.

"Wait here," he ordered the driver when they reached the apartment building. To Jenny's "Can I come up?" he repeated "Wait here."

Ten minutes later he was back down again with a valet bag and overnight grip.

"To the airport," he said as he tossed the bags in beside the driver and then sank down beside Jenny in the back seat.

"What's it all about?" Jenny asked. "Are you going to Washington?"

The vacuous expression on Dave's face slowly evaporated as he stared at her. It was replaced by mocking humor.

"This is one time you don't stand a chance of getting the scoop," he said. "All you can turn in is that Dave Burss was called mysteriously to Washington—and the Bugle won't even carry *that* announcement."

"I'm going with you," Jenny

said determinedly.

"Oh no you're not," Dave said.

"Oh yes I am," Jenny said. "Driver, flag down the next cab you see. I'm going home and pack."

"I'll see you at the airport—or Washington," she said to Dave over her shoulder a moment later as she left the cab and climbed into another.

But twenty-four hours later she began to wonder. She had missed Dave at the airport, and had learned that an airforce plane had taken off from the field a short while before she got there. She had taken the next passenger plane to Washington.

She had checked all the large hotels without finding any trace of Dave. Finally she had checked in at one of them and gotten some much needed rest.

Then she had continued her search for Dave, without success.

Now she went back to her hotel to her room. A shower partially dispelled her feeling of defeat. She ordered some lunch and the latest papers brought up to her room and spent a leisurely half hour with them, further dispelling her gloom.

Carrying the last cup of coffee with her over to the phone stand, she placed a call to the CLARION. She sipped coffee while waiting for the connection.

"Hello, John?" she said. "Jenny. I haven't been able to find Dave anywhere, but I'm sure he's in Washington . . . Yes. I'm convinced it has something to do with what they learned from the wire

recorder off the ship . . . Nothing has come out in the BUGLE? . . . Well, that means whatever they know is strictly hush hush so far."

She listened idly to what her editor was saying, her eyes looking out the window of her room across the city to the Potomac. Suddenly her eyes widened in surprise.

"John!" she said quickly into the phone. "I can see the river from the window here in my hotel room. A navy ship is being towed up the river by tugs. I think it's the ship those two eggs are on. At least, I see a television coptor a few hundred feet over it, keeping pace with it . . . The eggs haven't hatched yet? They're still on the television? . . . Then this is the way I see it: Maybe the President made some sort of agreement with Dave to give him the scoop on this as a reward for his bringing the two cases to Washington in the first place, and is carrying out his agreement now by bringing Dave here for the payoff . . . Yes, they must have found out from the recorder when the eggs would hatch, and have brought them in in preparation for that. It seems certain enough so that we can afford to risk being wrong . . . Good. Bring out the extra right now and we'll scoop even the radio."

She hung up, waited a few seconds, then called downstairs for a cab. Three minutes later she was on her way to the river.

A crowd had already gathered. Jenny stood on tiptoe and peered over the heads of the closely

packed throngs, trying to find Dave among the dozen or so men on the dock who were waiting for the ship to be warped into its berth.

None of them was Dave. But suddenly there was movement on the deck of the ship. Dave and several other men appeared. Realization of what had happened made Jenny stamp her foot in anger at the hours she had spent searching Washington. Dave had gone to the ship while it was still on the ocean, perhaps by coptor, or maybe aboard one of the tugs.

Firmly Jenny pressed through the crowd in an attempt to reach the route Dave would have to take to leave the dock. After a hard struggle she made it, looking like something dragging home at four o'clock on a Sunday morning. Pulling her crumpled hat back off her eyes, she plastered a too-bright smile on her tired face and waved frantically, calling, "Davel Davel!"

He was too far away, and uniformed police kept her pressed against the mass of humanity at her back as they kept clear a pathway for the automobiles on the dock to leave by. And when the car he was in went past it did so so swiftly she couldn't be sure whether he saw her or not.

She watched the cars disappear with a sinking feeling. Where were they going? Did they have the eggs with them — or the hatched aliens? She couldn't be sure. She had thought a small box was carried off the ship by one of the men; but she had been so intent on trying to get Dave to see

her that she hadn't paid too much attention to other things.

With the cars and Dave gone, she found herself in the middle of slowly moving obstinate people who simply would not let her hurry. It was half an hour before she was free of the crowd. She wasted several minutes searching for a non-existent cab, and another ten minutes trying to catch busses that were already so full the doors wouldn't close.

It was a full hour after Dave had gone before she collapsed with the fatigue of frustration in a cab and left the waterfront. And by that time Dave could have gone anywhere.

Back at the hotel she called her boss and learned what had happened.

"I'm reading it from a special edition of the DAILY BUGLE," he said. "Brought out, I might add, just soon enough after our own extra to kill its sale almost one hundred percent. It says—"

There was the sound of rustling paper.

"It says, the spools have been completely translated. As a result of information gained from those spools the eggs are being immediately taken to an undisclosed spot where they will hatch within the next forty-eight hours."

"Then that's where they went," Jenny said eagerly.

"Yes," came the answer dryly. "Now all you have to do is go to that undisclosed spot."

"That's simple," Jenny said, sounding slightly hysterical with happiness. "I know where it is!"

"Where?" came the surprised grunt.

"I don't know," Jenny hesitated. "Wait'll I get a map—Oh, there isn't a map around here. Do you have a map of the United States handy?"

She tapped her bright red fingernails nervously on the table top while she waited.

"All right," the phone came to life. "I've got it spread out on my desk. Now where is it."

Jenny closed her eyes and frowned intently.

"Put your pencil on Los Angeles," she directed. "Got it? Now run your pencil northeast about two hundred miles. Where are you?"

"Just a minute while I measure the distance . . . that's about at the southern tip of Death Valley."

"Then that's where they're going with the eggs," Jenny said positively. Her face lit up excitedly at something. She went on hurriedly. "I think I know the reason they have to take them there, too. This may be far fetched, but right now it seems the only reason. Seeds; perhaps contained in those two cylinders along with the eggs. Seeds that can only grow in a place like Death Valley. Seeds that grow into plants the baby aliens will need for food. Yes. That's it. It stands to reason. G'bye now. I'm off for Death Valley."

Jennifer squinted at the activity going on down below. The white sands looked like an ocean frozen in mid-wave. A freight coptor was just rising into the shimmer-

ing air, its blades making a design of blurring motion that formed a canopy over its truck body.

There were several jet planes parked in an orderly line. And little dots were moving slowly about in the vicinity of a partially put together prefab structure.

She could visualize what was going on. The prefab would be finished in a few hours, complete with airconditioning, running water, and all the conveniences of modern civilization. It was a standardized air-force-ground-battalion operation which could even include shrubs and a green lawn by the addition of the letter C at the end of the operation order.

She pointed downward and nodded vigorously in answer to the pilot's questioning glance. The Earth veered sharply. A moment later the scene of activity reappeared directly ahead, growing rapidly larger. Jenny felt herself drawn toward the nose of the plane as the airbraking took hold. Then her teeth were rattling together as the washboard ripples of the sand hammered the plane.

A uniformed attack bore down on the plane even before it came to a stop. Men with drawn guns ordered Jenny and the pilot to get out.

"What's the idea?" one of them growled.

"I'm a reporter," Jenny said brightly.

"Well, that's just too bad," the man snarled. "You're going to have to go back in the next cargo plane and spend a few weeks in confinement. We can't let the lo-

cation of this place get out for some time yet."

"Dave!" Jenny screamed, catching sight of him in the shade of a plane with several other figures.

"Jenny!" he answered, running toward her. "How in the world—?"

He caught her in his arms and kissed her, then held her at arm's length, his hands gripping her shoulders.

"I remembered that map on the last spool," Jenny said. "When the BUGLE said 'undisclosed spot' I knew right away where it would be."

Dave nodded. "I remember now. But you can't get away to tell your editor. This has to be kept secret."

"I'm afraid it's too late for that, Dave," Jenny said. "You see, it's already on the street. The extra with that in it went off the press at least two hours ago. The presses were rolling when I took off from Washington two and a half hours ago."

Dave groaned.

"We'll have to send for a police patrol to order away any other planes," an officer said. "I'd better get on it before every newspaper in the country has a reporter here. But that means out you go, young lady. You and your pilot climb back in your plane and scram."

"Wait a minute," Dave said quickly. "As long as she's here I'd like for her to stay—on one condition." He looked at her sternly. "This is *my* scoop, Jenny. You can stay if you will promise to leave it to me. No doublecross."

"I promise, Dave," Jenny said, her voice subdued and contrite.

"Okay," Dave said. "Come on."

She followed him obediently to the shade of the plane where most of the civilians were hiding from the searing rays of the desert sun. There were polite introductions. When they were over, Dave and Jenny sat down on the sand with their backs against a wheel of the giant plane.

"Why here?" Jenny voiced her greatest question.

"I can tell you now, I guess," Dave chuckled. "You can't phone your paper. You see, when the eggs hatch, the cylinders open. When they open, thousands of seeds are shot out. These seeds start to grow within twenty-four hours, and by the time the aliens are hungry there's plenty of the kind of food they have to have to live."

"Oh," Jenny said innocently. "You were plenty smart getting the President to give you the scoop on all this. That way, you are the only reporter here."

"That's not the reason why I'm here," Dave said. "As a matter of fact, it looks like my days of being a reporter are almost over."

"They are?" Jenny said, wondering what Dave would say when he discovered she had already scooped him, not only on the location here at Death Valley, but also on the seeds in the cylinders.

"Yes," Dave said. "You see, I—"

He stopped talking, a queer look on his face.

The general innumur of conversation about them hushed sud-

denly. A man with iron gray hair and grave, kindly face came over and bent down over Dave.

"It's happening," he said shortly. "Someone go see if the prefab is far enough along so we can get him in until this is over."

"What's happening?" Jenny asked anxiously, her eyes alternating between Dave's absently staring ones and the doctor's grave, intelligent ones.

"No questions, young lady," the doctor said firmly.

Jenny walked aimlessly, kicking the fine white sand at each step, her hands nervously twisting what remained of her handkerchief.

Twelve eternal hours had dragged by. She had not been allowed to go near Dave. The doctor had briefly elicited the information that he was in a coma. He had turned away without answering when she demanded to know why. Others had answered her questions with a shrug and a look of pitying sympathy.

The two cylinders containing the eggs lay out on the blistering sands of the desert—as if carelessly forgotten. But when she had tried to go near them, what seemed a whole army had suddenly materialized and told her not to go near the eggs under any circumstances.

So she had stayed away from them, her feet carrying her aimlessly about the camp, her mind tortured with fears and anxieties. Time after time Dave's voice came into her mind: It looks like my days of being a reporter are about over.

What had he meant? Was he going to die? Had he contracted some disease from his contact with those cylinders?

Her tormenting thoughts were interrupted by a shout from the direction of the eggs.

"They blew!"

She rushed with the others to see what had happened. Had the eggs hatched? She squinted at the cylinders. They seemed no different than before except that—

Her heart pounded against her ribs. The ends of the cylinders were open, the covers laying on the sand a few feet away from them.

"The seeds went out like a puff of dust," a voice was saying.

So the seeds were sown now. That meant— She turned to the man who had spoken.

"The eggs are hatched now?" she asked tensely.

"I guess so," he answered doubtfully. "But we can't go near to find out. Orders."

Finally Jenny, along with the others, was driven back into the shade by the sun. Now and then her eyes sought the motionless cylinders for a moment.

Several hours passed, during which quiet men brought her a plate with a cold lunch on it, and a glass of ice cold milk.

Then the white sands began to assume a different shade. At first Jenny thought her eyes were playing tricks; but before long the change was unmistakable. A roughly oval area beginning at the cylinders and extending a hundred yards was definitely turning

green.

The change grew more rapid. Something was growing — springing out of the moistureless white sand!

There was a murmur of voices and heads turned toward the prefab. Jenny turned to look and saw Dave emerging, a broad smile on his face.

"Dave!" she cried, rising and running toward him. "Are you all right?"

"Oh, sure," Dave said calmly. "There wasn't anything to worry about."

"Then why didn't they tell me not to worry?" Jenny said, breaking into tears.

"Oh, now," Dave soothed, patting her shoulder. "Come with me. I want to show you something."

He took her hand and led her toward the two cylinders. A television camera on one of the planes followed them.

When they reached the cylinders Dave let go of her hand and kneeled down. He looked at the cylinders for a moment, then suddenly looked up at her, a shy expression on his face.

"For the last time, Jenny," he said. "Will you marry me?"

She looked in his eyes. Something seemed to flow into her.

"You know I will, Dave," she said softly. "Any old time."

"You'll have to give up your job and live with me—here," he said, taking in the prefab with a gesture of his eyes.

"Here?" Jenny echoed, looking around blankly.

"Of course," Dave said. "Didn't

they tell you? It seems that when I took the cylinders out of their case I established some sort of bond between me and the eggs. Something about the minds of these two babies running on the same wavelength as my own, sort of. So I have to raise them."

At that moment something poked out of the end of a cylinder. It was a head.

"Oh!" Jenny squealed in delighted surprise.

The large bright eyes of the creature turned and looked up at her. The cute mouth and snub nose distorted into a cheerful expression.

Two small hands appeared, grasping the edges of the cylinder opening, fingers fine as soda-pop straws. Soft brown fuzz shaded the bright green color of its skin.

"It's cute!" Jenny exclaimed as the creature fully emerged. "Why—it looks just like a little green monkey."

She stooped down and held out her hand. It evaded her and leaped against Dave, clinging to him.

The other emerged suddenly and joined its twin. Their four bright eyes stared at Jenny, unwinking, their pipestem arms curved over Dave's shoulders.

Jenny looked from their two faces to Dave's and back again.

"Why Dave," she murmured. "They look just like you."

"Love me love my two kids," Dave retorted. "But they'll grow up in a couple of years. Then we can start raising some of our own. Okay?"

Jenny hesitated, looked around and saw the television cameras and the sensitive microphones creeping closer.

She leaned toward Dave cautiously and whispered, "Okay."

"Okay, Okay," two deep baritone voices shouted. The two aliens leaped from Dave's shoulders and galloped off into the green jungle of vegetation which was now almost two feet high.

Dave and Jenny stood arm in arm watching. Now and then a grinning green, monkey-like face rose above the vegetation and glanced toward them, and from the dense growth came a baritone chattering that sounded strangely like English.

"I wonder how many other planets these children have survived on," Dave said suddenly, breaking the intimate silence between them. "That ship—it didn't have any aliens on board. The records on those spools told all about it. The ship is a robot that goes from one solar system to another, dropping eggs on any planet that seems to have conditions favorable to life. It's been doing it for ten billion years according to what the voice spools said, and will go on doing it until it meets with destruction."

"But then what lays those eggs?" Jenny said. "I mean, how old are—were they?"

"They were fresh eggs, if that's

what you mean," Dave said. "They're turned out by a big incubator-like machine on the ship that keeps multiplying sperm and ova and bringing them together and manufacturing an egg about them."

Dave looked down at Jenny. His face split into a wide grin.

"Bet you can't guess what the race they belong to is called," he said.

"Of course I can't guess," she said.

"Don't laugh, now," Dave warned. "They're Jennies, Jenny. That's what the wire recorder said they were—Jennies."

A mischievous twinkle appeared in Jenny's eyes.

"Well," she said matter-of-factly. "They don't look too much like human beings, but you got to admit after what you told me that they're Jennian people! HELP!"

The television camera followed her as Dave chased her toward the prefab, and neither was aware of the millions of people watching through their radios, hoping he would catch her and slaughter her for such a blasphemous but delightful execration.

The two infant Jennians stood up in the tall green growth and watched them too, unaware that in that instant a simple pun had opened every heart in America to them—to give them welcome.

THE END

"THE GAMIN" By Peter Dexter

Coming Next Issue

The story of a "daughter" of the atom war, driven underground.



The two giant figures floated down out of the whirling blackness above, becoming more solid in appearance . .

DESCENT FROM MERA

by MILLEN COOKE

WILL YOU hear an old tale of a time when the world was new, or at least not as ancient as it now appears to be? Whether new and old are points of consideration, or where the world itself would place these circumstances in its own chronology (could it be questioned directly) is of no moment.

However, there *was* such a time when things then were not as they are now. The times were different, the seasons were closer together, the land was warm and wet, and the very shapes of it have been altered since. Air itself, then, was

not the same substance exactly that we now breathe and exist upon, and there was considerably more of what we would recognize as water in it and in the rivers, the lakes and the seas.

Young as it was, the warm earth was not too infantile to support the life of creatures who came and went over its surfaces in a manner to startle one of our generation. He would be able to see them, after a fashion, or at least a few of their number, but what he would do thereafter would depend entirely upon whether he was the sort to run after or away from

In the time when the world was young, were there mysterious worlds of a substance not suspected today lying close to our own, perhaps in other dimensions, fathering the future races of man?



whatever made him afraid.

There were goings and comings of another sort, also. It has been breathed darkly and cautiously into the meanings of words of our own day and time that these visitations and departures have not ceased altogether; that now and again some weary human looks up toward the sky, or out across the sea, and perceives for an instant or longer the shapes of what have been built to descend and to ascend again. Call them ships if you like, if it makes you feel comfortable to give them a name from your own experience. They who build them would not call them that. The principles involved in their construction are far more complex than we have yet found required of any instrument of transportation by water or air.

Into the time and the space of our early history slipped an identical pair of these great machines. Slowly, with the wonderful majesty of perfect precision, they dropped toward the land-surface of Earth. They were not borne upon the air. They pushed it aside, and their power and bearing was drawn from another source. They shone with a brightness black to the eyes of human-kind—and there were such eyes to look up, even then, and record their coming.

When it was seen that one dark shape would come to rest not far from a cluster of caves, the eyes that watched grew bright with fear and wonder. Never before had they witnessed such a phenomenon. Nobody knew what it meant.

The females gathered up the aged and hurried them far back into the caverns. Then they returned for those children who were still unable to run or walk and follow. The males cowered shoulder to shoulder across the cave mouths, afraid to see, yet more afraid not to see.

They stared at the shape that lay at an angle across the valley. Was it a bit of the night sky that had somehow fallen down? Was it good or evil, that awesome, featureless cylinder of darkness?

Trained as they were in the arts of bodily control in the interests of self-preservation, there was a gasp and a movement among the watchers when first one and then another shadow detached itself from the bulk that had drifted down. They were like heat-devils, these shadows; transparent, yet wavering, distorting what lay beyond them, and they moved with purpose although their true shape was indistinguishable. They approached the caves.

At first the males made as if to face their coming bravely but as the shadows drew nearer they became more distinct as though they drew something out of the atmosphere that made them visible. Slowly they became whitish, then distinctly blue, and when they had become the color of a summer sky at right angles to the sun, they appeared to be men, or manlike, like the males who watched. And yet, they were different, too, very different—far too different. As one, the males turned away from the cave mouths and with hardly a

sound they raced far back into the deeper caverns beyond the reach of light.

The two blue figures approached the cave entrances and stooped to look into one, and then another.

"Nothing here, Xent," the taller of the two beings exclaimed. He was formed to be called a god among men, a good six yards tall, and made in a manner to suggest that the Greek marbles might have been humanized versions, remembered dimly and later made, of his type of being. They were not quite human as we like to think of it, and yet they were, in a strange and beautiful way that a human might like to copy if he could. Their faces were calm and oval, and they were three-eyed. They were broader across the shoulders for the height of their frame; longer in the legs; hands, feet, and fingers all very long in the "bones"—but what did a creature have for bones who could come out of a waver of transparent light and make himself opaque and visible?

"Too bad," replied the one addressed as Xent. He towered a mere fifteen feet, but he looked younger, too, and his attire was plainer, glittering less with the trimmings of shining stuff that appeared to give off a light of its own against the sun.

"Does that mean we shall have to go back without a full load?" he continued. "Name of Tahl! if only these creatures were a trifle more intelligent!"

"It's nothing to swear about," laughed Hoth, but he eyed his companion critically. "After you've made another trip or two you'll learn how it goes. One stop, and you may get a hundred or so. Then again you may make a dozen stops and get only one or two, especially in thinly stocked areas like this. Without a doubt, Xent, Ched is garnering them in by droves on the other side."

Xent's disappointment was obvious.

"Why should that be," he sighed. "What's over there?" He kicked absently at a pile of withered leaves that lay against a large stone just outside one of the caves.

Hoth sat down and put his back against the stone.

"There is a story," he said, "that they have a civilization."

Xent laughed and kicked the leaves again, this time showering Hoth with their thin, rattling shapes. Hoth did not appear to be amused. He looked up at Xent until the youngster's face had sobered.

"I'm sorry, Hoth," Xent murmured contritely, and kicked the leaves again for yet another reason.

"It's all right, Xent," Hoth reassured him. "But here's the story, and it's not as amusing as it once was. In fact, it's been giving Control a bad time these past few years—such a headache, to tell the truth, that they haven't issued a particle of information on the subject for more than fourteen moons. We've been losing machines, Xent, complete with oper-

ators."

"But haven't we always lost some machines, and a few operators?"

"Yes we have. But here is a situation: A machine goes down, and it fails to reappear. Searchers go out. They know the district that machine was sent to cover, and they search it, comb it, and they do not find the lost machine."

"Maybe it fell in a swamp," Xent teased. "You just missed one yourself, you know." He pointed toward the muddy little valley where the dark shape lay. Hoth shook his head. "Maybe 'it' did, my boy, but sixty didn't."

Xent whistled in amazement. "Sixty?" he repeated incredulously. "Shape of Tah!"

"Sixty machines; one hundred and twenty men; and rumors, now, of a kind of civilization among the Hu-men. Put it together, and what do you make of it?"

"That seems fairly obvious, doesn't it? They have simply found a way to kill the operators and are attempting to copy what they find."

"But the machines, Xent, the machines!" Hoth persisted. "What have they done with them? What *could* they do with them?"

There was silence between them for a long minute while they thought together about it without speech. Xent began to kick the pile of leaves again. Suddenly his sandaled foot struck something soft and yielding. There was a frightened whimper from the something. Hoth turned and

swept away the remaining leaves with his hands, revealing the huddled body of a Hu-man child. It did not move, but lay quite still, its knees drawn up, and its head pulled down tightly upon them, arms locked around its folded legs. Hoth seized it gently in his enormous hands without trying to uncurl it. Xent eyed it curiously.

"So that's what they really look like in their natural haunts!" he said, and there was a keen edge of excitement in his voice. "Are we going to take it?"

Hoth appraised the child.

"It's hardly four years old, I'd say. A little young."

"But they grow," Xent insisted. "They grow in Mera, just as they would here, only better. Why not take it?"

Hoth hesitated. The child was a male. Why not, as Xent said, take it. After all, the hunting had not been good, and even an immature Hu-man would be a better prize than none—unless, of course, Chcd happened to be having wonderful luck on the other side of the planet.

"Make the net," Hoth said.

On the forefinger of each hand Xent wore a ring of metallic appearance, set with hemispherical objects that emitted a yellowish glow. They were arranged in different patterns on the two rings. In the ring upon his left hand, there were seven of them, a larger one set in the center of a circle of six smaller half-globes. In the other ring, there were nine of the objects arranged to form a square.

He turned these rings upon his fingers until the settings of spheres faced inward with his palms. Then he held his hands about five feet apart and a brilliant shimmering began to boil in the air between them. Hoth held the child inside the shimmering area and tried to pull its arms loose and to straighten out its tightly curled up legs. The child screamed at this, and screamed again in awful, unbearable fear.

Immediately there was a scuffling sound within the cave. Blows, muffled cries, and then the padding of bare feet running rapidly toward the entrance. Hoth snatched the child out of the brightness and it curled up again. Xent quickly turned the rings to their normal position and reached toward his belt for another opalescent sphere that swung there at the end of a short chain. As his hand touched it, a Hu-man burst headlong out of the cave and rushed toward the scattered pile of leaves. It was oblivious of them, standing there, until Hoth held the child down in front of it. The Hu-man stood up straight for the first time, then, and they saw that it was a female. She held out her hands in a pleading, imploring gesture, but Hoth did not surrender the child.

The woman was tall, for a Hu-man female. She stood nearly as tall as Xent and she was beautifully formed. Her skin was darkened by exposure to the elements, but a golden cast gave it a coppery sheen in the sunlight. Long black hair cascaded from her proud

head to swirl about her waist in a confusion of soft waving beauty. Her nose, in modern times, might have seemed too broad, the lines of her lips a little too fully curved, but her strong young body under the single garment of light bark-cloth that covered and revealed it with equal flattery would have been glorious in any time or place upon this Earth.

Xent's amazed eyes followed the lines of that beautiful body. In equal amazement, Hoth studied the lines and the material of the garment upon it.

"Hold her!" he barked to Xent, and still retaining his grip on the child he seized one of the woman's outstretched arms with his free hand. Xent laid hold of her other arm. The woman did not struggle at all. She simply fell forward in an unconscious heap at their feet. Hoth put the child down. It uncurled itself immediately, ran to the prostrate woman and fastened its body to her back, holding tightly with its arms clasped around her neck.

Hoth nudged the woman gently with his foot, and when she did not respond he bent down and tore away a portion of her bark-cloth garment. He handed it to Xent.

"Here is your proof," he said.

Xent had forgotten for the moment about Hoth's tale of a civilization among the Hu-men. It came back now with a rush of sudden excitement that was almost fear. Hoth felt it too, and the two men stood spellbound by their own speculating thought.

Abruptly, from somewhere within the dark machine, a bell-like tone, high, clear and demanding, reached their ears. Hoth cast a rueful glance toward the caves.

"We'll have to come back later and smoke them out," he said, and turned back toward the machine.

Xent called after him.

"What about the child? Shall I take it?"

"Never mind now," Hoth called back, and Xent followed him into the dark cylinder. Its great bulk rose slowly above the valley, hovered for a second or two, and shot away toward the east without a sound.

For a long time the female lay where she had fallen. Slowly, one by one at first, then several together, the inhabitants of the cliff crept out into the daylight. They saw no sign of their recent visitors. The machine had left no visible mark upon the valley, and there was nothing to tell them that anything unusual had occurred, except the unconscious female and the weeping child. That much, however, was quite enough, along with their memories of the two figures who had appeared, seemingly from thin air, after emerging as shadows from a cloud of darkness.

No member of the tribe would touch the female, but they crowded near enough to see if she was breathing. Females, as they knew from experience, had a habit of dropping into this sudden sleep when they were hurt quickly, or frightened beyond endurance.

"She is dead," growled Ulu. He was a squat male with a great bull neck and arms that seemed entirely too long, even for his hulking body.

"She is alive," replied another male, whose name was Kad. "She breathes in and she breathes out. She is alive."

Other members of the crowd who were able to push their way up to the front ranks for a close look nodded and grunted their agreement with Kad. Ulu narrowed his eyes and squatted down where he was, near the female.

"Ulu will wait," he grunted.

Kad looked hard at Ulu, and took a position across from him. He said, loudly, that all might hear.

"Kad will wait."

He, too, squatted down upon the ground.

An excited buzz went through the crowd and most of the colony decided to wait with Kad and Ulu. They squatted in a circle about the female, the men elbowing the females and smaller children back to form an outer ring of chattering, neck-craning watchers. All knew, or learned at that moment, about the trouble between Kad and Ulu. It was this female. She had borne Kad the child that now clung to her, but she continued to live in her father's section, as was her right as long as the old man should live. But the old man was as frail as a leaf, or so it seemed, and his remaining days could not be many. So a contest had arisen between Kad and Ulu as to who should possess the woman when

her father died, since the old man refused to sell her outright to either of them and put an end to the argument.

Waiting made the crowd still and watchful as the suspense grew. The female did not stir, and the weeping of the child grew fainter and more fitful until at last it slept, exhausted, its head hanging down over one of its mother's shoulders, its face buried in the tangle of her long, dark hair.

It was only then that someone heard the old man calling. In the excitement he had been left in the far back of his cave. Now he was shouting for someone to come in and fetch him out. Kad made a motion with his arm, and two of the women left the watching circle and ran into one of the caves. In a few minutes they reappeared, supporting between them the bent and emaciated figure of a very old man. The crowd divided respectfully to let them pass through toward the center where Kad and Ulu crouched beside the female and her child. Once there, the old man waved away his two living crutches and they scurried back to their places at the outer rim of the assembly. He stood very straight now, fury written in every line of his unbelievably wrinkled face, fury rippling in his ancient muscles and gripped like a thunderbolt in his bony, leathery hands.

For a full minute he stood so before he spoke, and when his voice came out it struck the ears of his people with a fury that was not to be borne. It scorched like flame and slashed like the claws

of a tiger.

"I have been your chief!" he roared at Kad. "I have been chief of a people greater than this people! And now I have lived to see the chief himself squatting like one without power, threatening a lesser man!"

"Silence, Old Man," growled Kad.

"I will speak!" shouted the ancient. "Who gave you the power to become Chief?"

Kad bowed his head. "You did, Old One," he said meekly.

Ulu laughed, and the sound was short, ugly like the man himself.

The old man whirled to face him. Gone now was any sense or feeling of weakness. In his fury he was equal to them all.

"Be killed!" he screamed.

Ulu's eyes rolled in mortal terror. He put his head down upon his knees and curled up in the same position the frightened child had assumed. He rolled over on his side and waited. Here and there a male stood up among the people and moved toward him. The old man continued to shout the wickedness of Ulu before the cowering tribe, but Kad leapt to his feet and shouted the old man down.

"Stop!" he thundered above the mad tirade. "Kad commands! Old One, take your thoughts back to your cave. The power of Chief is with me now. It sits in your head no longer, and I alone may say die to a man if he must die!"

Ulu heard the words of Kad and uncurled himself. He saw the old man turn and totter up the slope

toward the cave mouth, and he saw Kad standing there, proudly watching the Old One go. He did not know what was in Kad's mind at that moment, nor did he bother to try to guess. His own mind was suddenly clouded with more hate and fury than it could contain. The young chief had saved his life, but under the circumstances he would have been far happier to have lost it, since, according to the law of the people, he, Ulu, now belonged to Kad!

An agony of resentment, fear, and hurt pride surged through Ulu, and he crouched, growling, calculating the distance between himself and the broad back of Kad. He tensed his muscles, gathering his huge strength to leap upon his enemy, but before he could act, the female moaned and Kad whirled around.

He growled menacingly at the crouching figure of Ulu, and bent down to watch the reviving woman. Slowly, as consciousness and feeling returned, the female struggled to a sitting position and gazed wonderingly around her while memory returned. The howling child demanded her attention and she cradled it in her arms, making curious deep throat-noises like a cat's purr made semi-articulate. When the howling had ceased the woman got unsteadily to her feet. Not a soul had spoken to her or made a sound, and Kad alone stood near her. Tentatively he put out a friendly hand, but she drew back, alarmed by the silence and the tense, watching faces.

"I go to find my father," she

said, and carrying the child, she hurried away toward the cave the old man had entered.

Disappointment welled up in Kad and turned to wrath. He cursed the people, threw stones into the crowd, and drove them all into their caves. All, that is, except Ulu, who folded his too-long arms over his brawny chest and stood where he was, laughing.

"Kad is chief, but Kad cannot make friends with a woman!" Ulu jeered.

Kad held a stone in his hand. It was a good round stone with here and there a jagged corner on it. It was just right for throwing, and Kad threw it, hard, at Ulu's head. Ulu was too surprised to dodge away and the stone struck him squarely upon the temple. He went down like a tree and lay quite still where he had fallen.

The young chief stood paralyzed while the full force of his horrible deed struck home. Like a man in a dream he walked over to the fallen Ulu and stared at him. Kad had seen men struck like that before. They seldom rose to walk and talk like other men again. He dared not touch Ulu to feel for a spark of life, for he dared not touch any unconscious person. The dead were safe to touch—but the unconscious, who were neither alive nor dead, might awaken strangely. If Ulu was breathing, Kad was unable to see it.

If Ulu was not breathing, then Kad, the chief of a people, had killed with a weapon one of his own tribe. Whether Ulu lived or

died, however, the attempt carried the full weight of the deed. It was as it was. Without a word or a sound, Kad turned swiftly and trotted away from the cliff toward the forest. Within a few minutes he disappeared among the trees at the eastern end of the meadow. The instinct of self-preservation was stronger than tribal law and Kad was not staying to be punished by his own people for the unthinkable crime he had committed. He found a trail and trotted along it, following the course of the boggy little stream down the widening valley, always eastward into the deepening forest.

In the darkness of the old man's cave the female huddled with her child and listened while the old man spoke gravely for many hours of strange and terrifying things. At last he said:

"Faa, my daughter, it is not good for you to be here."

"But my father," cried Faa, her voice tight with fear, "where can I go?"

"I came from a far place to live among these people," said the old man, "therefore, you can go to another. It is all the same."

He sighed and lay back among the skins covering the pile of grass that formed his couch. The interview was over. He would not speak again. Faa looked at him for a very long time, until all the light had left the cave. She held her child tightly and tried to think. The things her father had told her whirled about in her head and made a strange montage

of unbelievable pictures — unbelievable, and yet she too had seen the "gods," as her father had called them. He had seen them, when he was very young, and had not been taken, even as her child had not been taken. Now he was ready, he said, to go with them whenever they should come for him—as, indeed, he hoped they would.

What could she believe? Could she doubt her father? She stroked the face of her sleeping son and thought of Kad and of Ulu. She knew that whether she went to Kad or to Ulu there would be no peace either for her or for the tribe. Yes, she decided, it was better for her to go away, as the old man had recommended.

Swiftly she got to her feet and went about the cave, gathering up small things, which she wrapped in a softly tanned antelope skin. She exchanged her torn bark-fabric garment for a more durable one of hides, dressed the sleepy-headed child in a similar leather kilt and cape, wrapped him in a large woolly cover made of many wild-sheep skins sewed together, took up her packet of little things and slipped quietly out of the cave. The old man listened silently to her preparations and heard her go. A half-sad, half-relieved smile curved the corners of his mouth as he whispered:

"Farewell, Faa, farewell my daughter!"

Outside the cave the darkness was thick and frightening, but Faa remembered the words of her father: The gods do not take

women; they have never taken a woman—you will be safe. Silently and swiftly as some great animal, Faa glided across the clearing, passing not ten feet from the fallen Ulu, and entered the forest. She pushed her way through the underbrush for a hundred yards and burst suddenly into a trail. Turning to the left, she followed it into the night.

Hoth was moody and wanted to be silent as the machine sped eastward over the forest country, but Xent would not let him alone. He was brimming with questions, and Hoth was inclined to be lenient with the boy. After all, this was his first trip into the atmosphere, and a considerable amount of curiosity and excitement were pardonable under the circumstances. He tried to answer Xent's questions as clearly as he could, with a part of his mind, while the rest of it mulled over the problems presented by the bark-cloth garment worn by the Hu-man female and the stories he had heard before Control clamped down on all further information.

"She was a beauty, wasn't she," Xent said by way of breaking into Hoth's meditations.

"If you like them on the 'natural' side," Hoth grinned. He remembered how once, he too had thought the Hu-man females rather attractive. Xent went on:

"Why is it that we never hunt them, Hoth? Why must we take only the males?"

"Want to kill out the breed?" Hoth shook his head. "Take away

the females and after a while where is your supply of new stock coming from? You and I would be running errands for Control ourselves in a few centuries. They don't live long down here, and they don't last long in our country—and the supply has to keep pace with the demand."

Xent was thoughtful. "That's reasonable," he said. "But how did they get started down here anyhow?"

Hoth shrugged. "Who knows?" he said. "Control will tell you it's a secret of the Council. Anybody not on Control will tell you that nobody knows. They've been here for thousands of years. At least we know that much."

"Maybe they originated here in the first place," Xent offered. "You know: natural processes of spores, plus mutations, plus . . ."

"No, Xent," Hoth replied. "That much is certain, too. They descended somehow from our own life-group, there is no doubt of that—but very probably they came from a much lower order of it and nobody knows who dropped them here first, or why. This inner surface has a strange effect upon the life that touches it, inhibiting it in a very unusual way. Sometimes a life-form flourishes for a while, but eventually they all exhibit the same cycle: shortened life-span, decreasing size, and finally an almost total obstruction of consciousness, which comes along with the increased inclusion of complex atoms and molecules in the body framework. They lose their ability to move freely, they

become clumsy, multiply crudely and painfully, and then throw off the whole accumulation of chemical junk in a few hundred years. After that they live quite normally for a time and then take the ascent, just as we do, only they go much more quickly."

"Why hunt them then, as we are doing?" Xent inquired. "If they drop the chemical accumulation anyway, after a while, I should think it would be much easier simply to cruise the middle levels with nets and pick up all of them we want from among the loosed ones."

Hoth heaved a patient sigh. "They are not so good there," he said, "not so good. The things that happen to them here in their miasmal depths do them no good, either, I can tell you. They are covered with parasites that destroy the body framework. Indeed, these parasites are more often the cause of their dropping the chemical accumulation than any other single circumstance. Finally, when the framework is so weak in one or more places that the currents of life cannot flow through it properly, it loses its magnetic energy, and the great mass of heavy substance drops away, leaving the creature to live as best he can. After the chemicals are cast off, it is true, the body tends to repair itself, but the mind cannot hold it long. It is no longer perfect, and soon it, too, is cast away and the 'soul' ascends. No," he continued, "to be of any use to us, the body must be in excellent condition. No old ones, none with too many para-

sites, and none too young, because sometimes they grow well in Mera, and sometimes they don't."

"I see," said Xent. "I have visited the middle levels, too, and come to think of it, I don't believe I'd like to haul up a netful of the wisps and chunks of decaying things that float there or, indeed, to catch one of the ghouls that feed on them. I see your point. But go on, Hoth, I'd like to hear more about where the Hu-men came from and how they got to be the strange things they are!"

"As far as I know," Hoth replied, "they were men, like ourselves, and for some reason they were trapped on the lower surface. For some reason, further, they survived. Then, after due ages, they degenerated into their present animal-like condition. There is a school of thought which holds that they never amounted to anything more than they are now. That is the official opinion given out by Control, so you can take it or you can think about it, whichever you like."

"I'll think about it," Xent said, with a wry smile. "Now what about this phenomenon of chemical accumulation? What happens?"

"I'm no technician, Xent, but it's something like this: the normally functioning body, as we know it, acts as a powerful magnet upon many of the complex substances when it comes into contact with the chemical surface in some way. These substances are swept into the body and act upon one another, and are acted upon by

the body forces. When we walk outside the field of one of these machines we immediately begin to draw in heavy matter in this way. Most of the substances come from the air: oxygen, nitrogen, hydrogen, carbon, and lots of water. They come in quickly from over quite an area, and in some parts of the planet where the Hu-men are wise from experience we have to be careful where we go for the first few minutes. Often we create quite a breeze when we gather in the molecules—and the disturbance announces our presence to the countryside."

Xent nodded. "That much I learned at Control School before they sent me out—to expect to be the center of a good whirlwind at first, but not to pay any attention to it. Of course they said the cause was a 'secret of Control.' Go on, Hoth, if there is more that you can tell me. Why the short time limit on excursions outside the machine? Is it really true that the heavy stuff gets permanently stuck?"

"Definitely!" Hoth continued. "The body will cast off the chemical atoms as quickly as it takes them in—within a certain limited time. The field of the machine shakes them out again, and to the dull, chemical-clouded eyes of the Hu-men, we must seem to disappear in a puff of mist after we have been among them and return to the machine. However, if a body is left on this surface too long, certain of the chemical atoms will not shake out. The unfortunate fellow who has that hap-

pen to him is doomed. He can never return to Mera, but must remain here, to survive if he can. It is very doubtful if any of us would last very long under those circumstances, living like a Human, becoming duller, more dense, and clumsier every day. Undoubtedly such an experience would be more than a mind could endure."

"Wait a minute," Xent was puzzled. "A while ago you were telling me that when these creatures cast off the chemical body they become like us. It seems to me it would be a simple act to cut off the intake of oxygenated air, and allow the chemical body to drop away, just as we do when we capture a Human and take him. Then the unfortunate person, whoever he was, could walk to the nearest machine, shake off the few atoms he might collect on the way, and go home, a happy if a wiser man."

"It has been done that way," Hoth agreed, "but the part of a man that forms desires, once it has had a deep taste of this chemical surface life, will not let the mind rest until it has come back again. The experience is like a drug, once it takes hold, and it pulls against intelligence to seek the blissful oblivion of another chemical immersion. They all go back, or they become inactive. That is the reason for immediately outlawing anybody who over-stays the limit."

"Shapes of Tahl!" Xent murmured. "What a terrible picture."

A small white cube set into the

wall gave out a tone. Xent picked up a shallow, concave disk that was connected to a panel near the cube by a length of flexible cord. He placed the plate on the top of his head. In a moment he said:

"Ched is on."

Hoth pushed a button on the control panel and swung around to take up another of the disks. When it was on his head he too could see and hear Ched and speak with him without any particular mental effort.

Ched sat in the cabin of his machine. His feet were up on a bench and he wore a large, self-satisfied grin as he hailed his two friends. There was no other operator in sight, since Ched was jealous of the fame he had won in Mera by hunting and taking many loads of Hu-men by himself. From the arrangement of the control panel it was apparent that his machine was stationary.

"Hello there!" he called cheerily. "How goes the hunting?"

Xent made a face, and Hoth grunted. Ched laughed.

"I always knew you were crazy, Hoth. Didn't I tell you not to waste your time in that territory? They haven't multiplied nearly as well over there, and besides you have nothing to see. You'll beat your heads on the walls when I tell you what I know!"

He leaned back in his chair and bit a large chunk out of a particularly juicy Meravian woa-fruit.

Hoth made a mock gesture of submission.

"All right," he said. "Now tell us what you're sitting on that

makes you look like you do—which isn't pretty."

Ched took another leisurely bite of woa before he answered. Then, with his mouth still full, he shook his head and half said, half chewed:

"Huh-uh! Come on over to my house, and you'll find out." Still grinning and munching woa, he stood up, and with very elaborate ritual gestures of courtesy, removed the plate from his head, leaving them, in more ways than one, in the dark.

"Sud eat him!" It was a fearful curse, but Xent was laughing.

Hoth was not so pleased.

"He didn't even give us a bearing! Tah! what an idiot. Why does the Council let him out, him and his foolishness, to riot around the Earth!"

"It could be," Xent remarked with exaggerated innocence, "that he is a very good hunter!"

Hoth laughed then. "All right. Where is the fool?"

Xent looked at the panel near the cube, and called off a series of numbers: "And that's as near as I can get it; he scrambled the code at the end."

"Ought to be near enough," Hoth replied. "We'll wander over and find out what he's hatching. If it's another of his practical jokes, I swear he'll pay for it this time."

He occupied himself with the controls while Xent marked the position of the caves they had visited. His mind went back to his experience there, to the lovely tall female—her dark, soft hair . . .

Too bad she was only a Hu-man.
Too bad that he . . .

The machine lurched suddenly, out of control, and he lost his balance. As he fell he heard Hoth cursing steadily and coldly. Then sensation ceased, and the mind that was Xent worked furiously, co-ordinating the known elements of the situation. It got no reasonable answer and blanked into a blaze of light in which it rested.

For hours Kad trotted onward along the forest path. Pursuit, he knew, would be certain if anyone ventured out of the caves and discovered the body of Ulu. True, Ulu had seemed to be breathing a little when Kad had looked at him, lying there. But how could Kad know that Ulu would not die? The vengeance of a people upon a murdering chief was swift and terrible, and Kad had not yet developed any exaggerated opinions of the glories of a public atonement. He had fled. It would be all the same to his people. The old chief would choose them a new master and life would go on as though Kad had never been. Vaguely he wondered which of the males would be chosen . . .

He ran carefully for the first few miles, stepping, where he could, upon stones or upon the hardest ground. He watched the twigs and branches that swung across his path, careful not to dislodge their leaves or break them. It must seem as though no man had passed this way, and it was better far, he reasoned, to move more slowly at first than it was to

tire himself by running hurriedly and leaving a trail that any child could follow.

Later, when he had put a considerable distance between himself and the caves, he became less cautious. Hunger began to make itself felt and he looked about for food. Berries were plentiful and he took those he could reach without leaving the trampled surface of the trail. He paused at a shallow brook that crossed the trail and waded cautiously upstream into deeper water. Near a dark, mossed-over rock he flipped out a large trout with his hands, and carried it back to the trail where he ate it as he traveled. Large as it was, for its kind, the fish was only a morsel for Kad, and he nibbled at it to make it seem like more.

The sun was just going down when he reached the mouth of the little valley. Here, where it widened to enter a broader river-valley, the forest came to a temporary end, and Kad stood at the edge of the rolling, meadowy expanse and looked about him. Near the middle of the big valley a broad, marsh-bordered river moved sluggishly toward the south and east. In the tall reeds bordering its muddy waters Kad's keen eyes watched movements that told of huge animals, feeding among the rank vegetation of the bogs. Once he caught a glimpse of an armored head at the end of a long, serpentine neck, raised for an instant above the reeds, and as quickly lowered out of sight again. Twilight was rapidly becoming night, and the buzz and murmur

of nocturnal insects in the long grass was punctuated by increasingly frequent cries of night-hunters of the forest and the shrieks of their frightened victims.

In spite of the fearful sounds issuing from it, Kad turned back to the forest for protection. It was his home, and he knew it thoroughly and approved its ways. The valley-plain, he felt, would not welcome him at night. He looked about for a sleeping place and selected the high crotch of an oak-like tree where a huge branch hung out almost horizontally above the trail. There he would be able to sleep in safety, and, at the same time, the passage of any creature along the trail would arouse him. He would be able to observe it clearly without being seen. The fear of immediate pursuit no longer troubled Kad, but he was aware of the possibility of some later, indignant march against him, for at least the distance of a day's journey. Hence his precautions as he propped himself between the gnarled branches of the great tree and went to sleep.

Faa, without knowing it, had broken out of the underbrush into the same trail Kad had taken and was following his footsteps eastward. She was not traveling slowly. She slung the child upon her back where it whimpered a little until it became accustomed to the rolling and bumping occasioned by its mother's gait. Faa was running now, and there were many kinds of fear in Faa to give her strngth

and speed beyond her usual capacities for endurance. She ran a long time before she rested and refreshed herself from the small store of food she had included in her collection of articles from her father's cave.

Her fear drove her on again in a few minutes, and she rose and continued her running although the weight of the child was beginning to tire her severely. She rested next beside the shallow stream where Kad caught the fish. Now, she thought, she might safely sleep a little while. Certainly any further running was out of the question.

Putting the child down carefully beside her she scooped out a shallow hollow in a sand bar and curled up in it. In an instant she was sound asleep. The rising moon looked down over the forest and found it quiet except for those who hunted in the night, and those who fled.

Slowly returning consciousness recorded for Ulu the sound of stealthy, rapid footsteps passing along the ground somewhere not far from where he lay. He struggled to raise his head, but the slightest motion caused him incredible pain, and his eyes recorded only showers of sparks and sheets of lightning. He put his head down again until it cleared and tried moving a hand and then an arm. That was much easier, although no motion of any kind was pleasant. Finally, with care and caution, he rolled over on his back. He shut his eyes for a moment,

dizzy with the effort he had made, and when he opened them again he was surprised to see the dark, night-sky above him. Slowly and by degrees he struggled up to a sitting position. His head throbbed and he held his big hands against it to stop the heaving and swaying that seemed to be going on inside it.

He wondered how long he had lain there; what had become of the people; where was Kad . . .

Kad! All at once the whole reason for his predicament flooded into his consciousness and his slow brain took up again the thread of vengeance according to its nature. Now Ulu would demand the right, which was his, to slay that chief, and then he would go to the Old Man and force him to put Ulu at the head of all the people. Ulu would flourish. Ulu would be great! Ulu would take Faa to his cave and there would be no one to object. As for the child of Kad: perhaps he would kill the child. He did not know. For the time being it was enough to think of himself as very great.

Such fine, inspiring thoughts as these made him forget his headache, which was subsiding by this time, anyway, and he got clumsily to his feet. There was an instant or two of blackness when he swayed a bit before he caught his balance. Then he made straight away for the cliff and the cave of Kad. First he would deal with that one, and then do all the other things . . .

At the mouth of Kad's cave he paused and threw in a stone. That

would insult him! Wake him up like a hunted bear. Flush him out of his cover and then kill him—but slowly, so he would know what was going on, and Ulu might enjoy to the full his reactions to that knowledge.

No answer, No motion within the cave. No sound. Puzzled, Ulu put his head into the cave mouth and sniffed. If the cave had been occupied his trained hunter's nose would have told him so immediately. But there was no one there!

Bewildered, Ulu sat down by the cave and tried to think why Kad would not be at home. It was always an effort for Ulu to think, but after a lot of it, Ulu got an answer.

"Faal!" he shouted, and exploded in a streak of elephantine motion toward the old man's cave. He plunged through the opening like a charging bear, roaring a challenge as he came. It made no difference to him, now, that he was violating another man's cave. In his own mind, Ulu had become powerful enough to do anything. Ulu was chief (to Ulu) and he was demanding his just tribute from a subordinate male.

The sole answer to Ulu's reverberating challenge came from the old man's couch in the far corner of the cave.

"What do you want?" he quavered. "Who are you that you come in the night like a hungry beast and roar at those who sleep?" In the dark cave the old man could not recognize the intruder, although he raised himself on one elbow and peered into the dark-

ness in the direction from which the shouting had come.

"Ulu is great!" stormed the loud voice. "Ulu will kill Kad, now!"

"Not now, Ulu," said the old chief in the comforting voice of one who seeks to calm a hysterical child. "Kad is not here."

Ulu was silent while he tried to readjust his thoughts, and the old man continued in the same calm tone of voice.

"Go away, Ulu. There is no one for you to harm here. I am alone here, Ulu, so go away!" In the dark the old one sank back upon his couch and closed his eyes in the traditional gesture that terminated a conversation with a chief. Automatically Ulu turned to do as he was bid.

At the mouth of the cave he stopped; a thought was struggling to rise to the top of his head. The old man . . . Alone . . . That meant Faa was not there. Kad was not there. Faa . . . Kad . . . Ulu stooped to a little cairn near one side of the entrance and selected a large, smooth stone. He turned and glided softly back into the cavern. There was one sound of a stone striking something fairly resistant, nothing more. Then Ulu reappeared at the door of the cave. He stood before it and raised his resounding, bull voice in the danger-cry.

The males of the tribe swarmed out of their caves in answer to the voice of Ulu and clustered around him in a questioning group. For answer he pointed over his shoulder into the cave of the old chief,

and stood aside to let the others enter. When they had found the thing that was there to be found, they came out again, and with growls and threats demanded of Ulu to tell them who had done this terrible deed.

Before he could get his slow wits together to answer them, a spokesman came forward and asked: "Where is Kad?"

"Kad is gone," Ulu said.

The spokesman then asked: "Where is Faa, the daughter of the old one? Where is the child of Kad?"

"They are gone," Ulu repeated.

The man who had spoken was not so dull as Ulu. In the faint moonlight he could see the bloody wound on Ulu's head.

"Who gave you the killing-mark?" he demanded.

"Kad," Ulu replied through a growl of hatred.

The man turned to the assembled men and shouted his accumulated information:

"Kad is gone. Faa is gone. The child of Kad is gone, and Kad has wounded Ulu."

"And Kad has killed the old man! Kad is crazy!" cried a voice from the crowd.

A light seemed to travel across the face of Ulu. Underneath his slow wit there was craft and cunning, and he seized the opportunity that was being thrown at him.

"Kad has killed the old man!" he screamed, "Kad has taken away Faa and the child. Ulu will take hunters and follow Kad and kill him, now!"

There was no one to disagree or shout him down. The hunters of the tribe separated themselves from the crowd and began to search the clearing for a spoor. They quickly found the broken bushes where Faa had pushed her way through toward the trail. Once on the trail they followed her running-steps and the scatter of knocked off leaves and twigs, and they traveled as hunters travel on an easy trail, swiftly, and without rest.

The first thing that met Xent's eyes when he opened them was a strange face. It was most comfortably blue, so he closed his eyes again, the better to allow his thoughts to drift together and become a bit more coherent. A strange voice said: "He's conscious." He didn't hear the answer if there was one. His thoughts had slipped into dreams again for a moment, dreams of Faa, of Hoth . . .

He snapped awake as the picture of Hoth came into focus in his mind, sat up quickly, and looked about him. He was in the cabin of a strange traveling machine, identical in every detail except color, with the one in which he and Hoth had been moving eastward in answer to Ched's enigmatic invitation. A glance at a dial told him the machine was stationary and resting upon the chemical surface of the Earth.

Three other men were in the cabin with him. One was Hoth, who lay on another couch across the room, still unconscious. The

other two were Ched and the owner of the face that had been bending over him when he first regained his senses. Ched wore his usual mockingly provocative grin. The face of the other man looked as though it had not smiled lately and did not intend to smile at anything presently or in the future. It bore the lines of inward and outward struggle, and Xent noticed that the clothing the man wore was unusually rough, and not very well cut. There was something odd and vaguely disturbing about the man that made Xent feel uncomfortable, and with a shrug he swung his gaze back to Ched, turning on the couch as he did so and lowering his feet to the floor.

"Welcome to Hur," Ched greeted him, making a sort of little bow from where he sat.

"A fine welcome!" Xent rubbed the back of his head. "I suppose this is your idea of a capital joke?"

For once Ched did not laugh.

"No Xent," he said soberly with a glance at his unsmiling companion, "it is not a joke?"

Xent looked at the leathery man and back to Ched, decided to wait for his information, and said, "How is Hoth?"

"He's all right," the grim stranger replied. "Go on, Ched." He lapsed again into his impassive silence and continued to stare at Xent.

Ched went on.

"You see, Xent, Hur is a settlement. You might call it a colony, I suppose." He glanced again at the stranger, who nodded curtly.

Xent shook his head.

"No, I don't understand," he said.

Ched explained further: "This man, who is my friend, is called Lu. He is one of the oldest residents of Hur. He has just brought me a fine load of cleverly taken Hu-man males, for which I am deeply indebted to him, as you can guess. Now, I am not a man who enjoys being indebted to people wherever they live, so I intend to repay my friend for the privilege he has extended to me of living like a lord in Mera on the proceeds of my very lucky hunting. In order to do that, and to satisfy certain other conditions imposed upon me by my acquaintances in Hur, I was forced to invite you two here in a manner, which, I regret to say, involved certain unfortunate but not irremediable consequences. Ah!" he exclaimed as a groan from the couch interrupted the fine flow of his language. "I see our friend, Hoth, is taking an interest in contemporary events."

Hoth sat up and was introduced. He blinked a little as Ched brought him up to date, but he said nothing.

"And so you are here, at my special invitation," Ched concluded, and reached for another large, purplish woa-fruit. He bit into it and the blood-like juice ran down over his chin and splattered upon his tunic. He laughed, and wiped it away with the back of his hand.

Hoth looked at Xent, his mind working furiously. So this was it! A colony of renegades, gone solid,

making a business of peddling Hu-man males to hunters — but why? Hoth could guess at any number of reasons, but they were only speculations. More important at the moment was Ched's need of the two of them in order to "pay," as he put it, for his latest phenomenal load. No longer was it a mystery why the Council had loaded him with honors as being the greatest single-handed hunter of them all. Anybody can be a miraculous fisherman if there is a fish market open on the way home!

"Xent read your beam all wrong, Ched," he announced, as though Ched had been talking commonplaces.

Ched grinned at the man called Lu.

"He couldn't have," he corrected. "He must have caught it to the fraction. You got here didn't you?"

"Right," Hoth returned, "but according to my computations, that reading ought to have put us halfway around the planet. When the machine failed our position wasn't even halfway across the Northern Crescent. How do you explain that?"

"Shall we explain that, Lu?" Ched inquired of the silent stranger. A ripple of motion passed over the leathery folds of the man's face. It was probably intended for a smile, but it produced a sensation of chill in the room that even Ched noticed. He went on quickly:

"That was a little idea of Lu's, for the protection of Hur and its

inhabitants—not all of whom have been here so long or endured so much as he has. He has rigged up a relay web around this place that would make our technicians at home go wild with envy. It's laid out like a wheel in all directions, and whenever he wants to talk to somebody anywhere on the planet, he simply bounces the communication beam off a station on the far side of the web from the other party. It's whipped back, zing, right over our heads. The crystal picks up the reading from the relay and invited guests invariably set their courses for the far-off places. Naturally, since we're on the mail-route, they buzz over the roof sooner or later, and we net them down. All very simple, and handy, too."

"Pirates!" Hoth growled.

Ched smiled at him. "No flat-tery!" he remonstrated.

"What happens when somebody blunders into your short beam," Xent inquired. "What's to keep all of Mera from knowing where to come, in that case?"

"Nothing," Ched replied complacently. "Nothing at all, except that we aren't fools. We sweep our magic circle, boy, and when there's the slightest danger of being overheard in that fashion, we just don't talk."

"What do you expect to get out of this, Ched?" Hoth's voice had taken on the edge that meant extreme effort at self-control.

Ched stood up and fastened his belt. "I've told you, Hoth," he complained mockingly. "I've told you a thousand times!" He moved

toward the entrance and Lu turned to follow him. Xent and Hoth got to their feet, but Ched waved a restraining hand. "Not now," he cautioned. "Somebody will be around later to explain your duties to you and I shall make all the necessary announcements to Control. 'Lost: One traveling machine, complete with operators. Extensive search made (here pictures will be shown), but not a trace discovered.' Too bad. That will be the sixty-first entry in the book of disappearances." His loud laugh was suddenly cut off as the doorway closed up behind him.

Hoth and Xent rushed the door together, but the wall was smooth and solid where it had been. Neither of them could find any way to activate it. They were trapped, imprisoned neatly and most securely. Hoth swore and Xent sat down in the chair Ched had just vacated.

"Now what?" It was more an accusation than a question.

Hoth swung an impotent fist at the spot where the door had been and went on swearing.

"I beg your pardon," said Xent, "but you may as well rest. Ched spoke of someone's coming around after a while to explain some duties. If they turn out to be strenuous you may as well be fresh for them—or for any other possible duties we two might be able to imagine for ourselves if you will leave off that tiresome noise."

Hoth sat down on the couch again. "Do you feel inspired?"

Xent got out of the chair and

put on one of the communications plates that dangled against the wall. He was rewarded with a mental image of Ched, who appeared to be totally unaware of the call. He was deep in serious conversation with the leathery Lu. Xent listened intently for a half minute, but no speech came in. He removed the plate from his head and turned to Hoth.

"The viewer is on and tuned to Ched, but the speech is off."

Hoth jumped to his feet, went over to the wall and hopefully put on the other plate.

"Still at it," he grunted. "Maybe we can figure out something, though, even without the speech." He motioned for Xent to put on his plate again. As he did so, astonishment spread over both their faces. Hoth snatched the plate loose from its connections and kicked it across the room.

"What a filthy rotten trick!" he exclaimed and stormed back to his couch. When Xent had picked up the other plate, the whole scene had suddenly shifted back to its beginnings! The machine was connected to an automatically repeating record, tuned to re-play whenever a plate was connected.

"Well," Xent shrugged, "that lets that out."

Hoth looked up from his contemplation of the floor pattern.

"That lets us out, I'm afraid," he said wearily. "Have you any idea just how much chance we have of ever seeing Mera again—as citizens?"

"Not much, I gathered." Xent was prowling the place, pushing

buttons, turning switches, satisfying himself that nothing worked.

"You don't have to be so damnably calm about it!"

"He may as well be."

Both men whirled to face the soft voice from near the doorway. The man who stood there was very tall and very blue. His face was handsome, with only a little of the leathery look of the other man, Lu, and he carried himself like a great lord. Although he pitched it very low, his voice was firm and commanding. The two men felt an instinctive respect for this visitor, whoever he might be.

"I am Aza," he said, "and I am ruler here." He walked over to the chair, sat down in it as though it were a throne, and looked around at Hoth and Xent. "If you gentlemen will be seated," he invited cordially, "I will be most happy to tell you the facts of your present position." He continued without waiting for them to comply. "Nominally, I suppose, you would say that you are captives. I wish to assure you immediately that there is no just cause for such an unkind assumption, although, naturally, you will not be encouraged to leave until you have had an opportunity to test to the full the possibilities offered by the hospitality of Hur. As guests, you will be asked to perform a few simple tasks for us, which ought not to be too difficult, since you have already had considerable training and experience along the line of their requirements. If you perform these duties faithfully, you will in due time be granted the

privilege of becoming citizens of this empire. If you do not—well, then it is entirely possible that we shall be able to make other plans for you."

The tone of that quiet voice, as it reached this point, carried an unwelcome hint of what such plans might include. The two men found seats for themselves and waited for whatever might follow. There were too many tricks a man like Aza might know for an ordinary man to have a chance in a thousand against him in a contest. Further, neither Hoth nor Xent yet knew how to activate the door. Therefore, they waited like two attentive schoolboys for the Lord of Hur to speak again.

They did not have to wait long, and when he had done, Hoth, at least, wished heartily that he had never heard the story unfolded to their shocked and astonished ears.

Kad awakened to the sound of footsteps padding along the trail beneath his arboreal refuge. Cautiously, he peered downward between the leafy twigs that screened him from possible observation from below. A party of Human males was entering the forest from the grassy plain, traveling at a leisurely pace. They moved with the careful, calculated gait of a band of hunters, and there were many of them. Kad tallied them off on his fingers as they passed below him. There was a hunter for every finger of his right hand, for every finger of his left, and again for every finger of his right. That made one whole hand more

than there were trained hunters in Kad's tribe, including Kad himself. Kad marveled at their number, but he marveled even more at their equipment.

They carried very strange weapons, and he wondered if they could be magical. Tale-tellers in the tribe had spoken of wise weapons that followed their quarry like a cast stone, but with greater accuracy and far more deadly effect. The long clubs these hunters carried were tipped with something that gleamed brightly in the moonlight. They might possibly be such magic weapons, as might also the shorter curved instruments, or the short, feathered sticks. Kad watched in fascinated amazement as the group filed by and disappeared among the trees. When the last of them was out of sight, he dropped silently into the trail and stared for a long time into the shadowy forest, thinking.

It would be wonderful to possess such a club as those men carried. It would be equally wonderful to remain alive, and those men had the bearing of cunning and mighty hunters. Besides, there were many of them, and he was alone. However, if he possessed a weapon like their's he could go back to the tribe and make himself master of it in spite of laws and traditions. How could he manage to secure one of those clubs with the gleaming points?

As he stood in the dark trail wondering and thinking, a plan began to take shape in the back of his mind. Vague and elastic and without detail the plan moved

in his consciousness and his mind took hold of it. It began to take form, and Kad acted upon the first impulse from it. He searched about in the underbrush and found a good throwing-stone. He cradled the roundish rock in his huge right hand, and turning away from the rolling, grassy valley, moved off down the trail in the direction from which he had come a few hours earlier. Slowly he closed up the distance between himself and the hunting party and fell in behind them as they traveled along through the moon-checked forest toward the west. He thought of Faa and her child whom he had left behind with his people, and the determination grew stronger within him to possess for his own a magical weapon of power.

In another part of the forest it was also the sound of footsteps that awakened Faa from her dreamless slumber in the sand-bank. They were the footsteps of a very frightened deer, running madly along the trail toward the east. Faa watched the patch of moonlight near the ford, and presently the terrified animal cleared the brook with a long graceful bound, swerved suddenly to the left and disappeared into the thicket of bushes that bordered the stream. Faa strained her ears in an effort to determine what or who had frightened the deer, but the slight noise the brook made, rattling over the shallows at the ford, broke up the night sounds. She heard nothing alarming to

her, and finding herself somewhat refreshed by her sleep, she began to make preparations for leaving her primitive camp. The child was still asleep and Faa did not disturb him. She ate again, very sparingly, of her small store of food, gathered up the antelope skin bag, slung the child upon her back again and started up the sloping east bank of the little stream.

When she reached the top of the bank away from the noisy water, she heard voices. They were male voices, raised in excited conversation, and they came from behind her, in the direction of the tribal caves. They were not very near, but they were not very far away, either, and they were far too close for comfort. Fear and terror sent Faa flying along the trail like the frightened deer that had awakened her. Inwardly she spoke to the Great Deer, god of all deer, and gave thanks to him for sending his messenger to preserve her life and the life of her child.

A few minutes later she rounded a curve in the trail and ran straight into the arms of the leader of the strange hunting party from the East. She made no sound as the leader's fist struck home and she pitched forward, unconscious, upon the leaf-strewn trail.

Kad, following along in the deep dark under the trees, had come up so close behind the last member of the party that he nearly bumped him from behind when the commotion up ahead caused

the man to freeze suddenly in his tracks. Kad stood perfectly still, straining every sense in a supreme effort to learn the cause of this abrupt halt and alarm. The confusion occasioned by Faa's appearance was short-lived, and there was talking now. A voice called something. Kad did not understand, but the man ahead of him called back and turned his head to look along the trail behind him.

Kad had no choice of action. He leaped upon the man and brought the round rock down upon his skull with a single flowing motion. The man crumpled quietly and lay still. Deftly and silently Kad transferred all the hunter's possessions to himself, including every vestige of clothing and harness the man was wearing. He picked up the long club with the shining tip and hefted it, grinning in exultation. The curved thing, he found, had a thong across it, and he slung it across his shoulder as he had seen the other hunters do. Over the other shoulder he hung the bag of feathered sticks. Pride and joy welled up within him. He wanted to shout. He knew not the first thing about the proper use of any of his newly acquired weapons, but he had them, and to Kad, that, for the moment, was the all-important circumstance.

Presently, when the command came to move ahead again, Kad took his place at the end of the file of hunters. To all appearances, fifteen men of the same tribe passed along the trail, on expedition. Now and then, where the path was straight and wide, he

peered ahead. He saw that two of the men were carrying something bulky, slung from a pole in a net of ropes, but the wind held across their line of travel and the trail was always darker now. Neither his eyes nor his nose could tell him what the men were carrying. He contained his curiosity as best he could and tried to understand the speech of these strange hunters as he followed them along.

He noticed from the configuration of the country that they were approaching the region near the stream where he had caught the fish and the thought of it made him realize how hungry he was. However, before very long he was abruptly given other things to think about.

Faa had left an easy trail for Ulu and his hunters to follow. She had never deviated from the path and she made no attempt to conceal the traces of her passage. She blundered along, effectively obliterating the few indications of Kad's presence that might have been found by night, and leaving a litter of leaves, broken twigs and footprints that brought laughter to the thick, ugly lips of Ulu. He and his men ran at journey-pace, noticing as they ran how the scent became stronger with every mile of the way. They started a deer, but paid no attention to it. Their minds were preoccupied with larger, more important game, and they allowed the animal to run ahead of them down the trail and out of sight.

At that point, Ulu called the

first halt and they all sat down or sprawled in a wide part of the trail to rest and talk. Excitement ran high. All knew that they were close to their quarry, and there was jesting and a great deal of laughter, in which Ulu joined freely. He, too, was feeling exultant. Had they known how near they were, indeed, to the chief object of their blunt attempts at humor, there would have been no rest for any of them. But they had not considered the possibility that Faa might sleep. They pictured her moving on in desperation—not far ahead of them by their journey-running, so they could afford to rest.

Ulu had no idea where Kad was, nor did he care, particularly. He could deal with Kad later. First he would capture Faa. He was sure that Faa could lead him, somehow, to Kad. Ulu would then take his vengeance, in her presence, for all the indignities he had sustained, and teach everyone concerned a few lessons, as befitted one of his prowess and high station. "Thoughts tending to ambition" spurred him on. He roused up the hunters and took to the trail again.

They wasted very little time at the site of Faa's sleeping place. The condition of the ground told them that she had left the spot mere minutes ago, and they were off again, as soon as they had followed her footprints back into the trail. Even more confident now, they called to one another as they ran, and the strange hunters heard their voices as the two parties ap-

proached one another from opposite directions along the narrow tunnel of darkness that was the trail.

Again the strange column stopped. The leader barked a few short commands, and with a facility born of long practice, the hunters became a part of the underbrush on either side of the trail. The men who were carrying Faa swung their burden out of sight among the trees and returned to take up positions close to the trail. Kad slipped into the foliage, along with the others. He noticed with no little annoyance that the mysterious burden had been deposited across the trail from his hiding place and that there was no way, at the moment, for him to get across and discover what it was. The wind was still wrong, but it might have told him little anyway, among so many strange odors mingled together.

He was jerked out of his contemplations by a sudden vision of the figure of Ulu, lumbering down the trail in the fast, yet clumsy run that was characteristic of the man. He was closely followed by the other hunters of the tribe—eight in all. Evidently they had thrown away all caution and were hurrying down the trail in hot pursuit of something. But what? Kad was mystified, having just come over that trail himself. But of course, the passage of so many feet ahead of him might have wiped out the traces that had set Ulu and his fellows on. Or had he, Kad, left a trail like a careless bear? Or were they following what

the foreign hunters had caught?

The bushes along the trail suddenly erupted men. Fourteen spearheads flashed in the small patches of moonlight that filtered down between the dense masses of forest leaves. Ulu was brought up short with a spear's point at his throat. He did not know what it was, but the way it pricked his hide made him afraid, and he stood still, while the others of his group were herded up behind him. One of the men grasped the shaft of the spear that urged him and tried to pull it away from the hunter who held it. The hunter lunged quickly, the man screamed and dropped with the spear through his heart. After that, the remaining captives were less inclined to resist, and suffered themselves to be pushed into a tight little group beside their leader. A terrible dread of these awful weapons filled their souls and they cowered at the center of a ring of spears.

Kad watched the drama from his hiding place with mixed emotions. Surprise at seeing Ulu was followed by amazement at the swift overthrow of the tribal party by these other hunters. A savage joy filled him when he saw a demonstration of what the long clubs were good for. He had not yet seen a spear being thrown—to him it was magical enough to know that one could thrust and kill. He frowned and hefted his spear, thought of it deep in Ulu, saw Ulu standing there in the trail, afraid, and measured the distance with his eye. But some deep stir-

ring of the sense of fair play stayed the rush he had planned. No. Kad would follow these men, and somehow, somewhere, he would fight Ulu again, if they did not kill him.

Cat-like, he slipped out into the trail, and when the leader of hunters counted his men before giving the order to march back toward the east, fifteen spears were raised for his passing touch. It was too dark to see faces clearly, but that did not matter. The spears were there, and spears were men of his clan. As yet, the weapons they bore were known nowhere else in all the world. He sent three men to carry out the woman and her child, and driving the well-tied prisoners before them, the party turned back toward the broad grassy valley by the way it had come.

"A hundred years ago," Aza said to Hoth and Xent, "I was an ordinary hunter, like yourselves. This was my machine, and I operated it over the larger part of the Northern Crescent. Other continents appealed to other operators, but the Northern Crescent intrigued me, with its wide expanses of grass-covered plains, its mountainous regions with their wooded and rocky slopes, and the huge trees with their infinite variety of foliage. In time I became a sort of forester, as well as a hunter. Naturally, I could not let this be known in Mera, so I built, during my visits to this district, the first stone building ever to be erected on the surface of the earth. It

housed my collection of woods and leaves, and sometimes during every trip I made, I would find an hour or two to spend among my 'toys.'

"There was a serious side to my occupation. I discovered strange laws of growth at the chemical levels, and learned to control the development of certain vegetables in one way and another. New species originated under my direction. These experimental plants I would then take to various parts of the globe, and try them in different soils and climates, to see how they would grow. Sometimes they flourished, sometimes they failed. In any event it was all part of a most fascinating experiment.

"My junior operator, who was and is my truest friend, was with me in all of these experiments. It was his desire to do with the fauna of the globe what I had done with the flora. We built another house a short distance from my plant museum, and he began to keep certain animals in and near it. He invented a screen that we could erect about ourselves. This enabled us to remain away from the field of the machine for a longer period than usual without being permanently affected by the heavy atoms. Together we spent many happy hours at our occupation; he with his animals, I with my beloved plants. Mera and the Control were none the wiser.

"As time went on, I realized that my major interests were here, with the experiments, rather than at home in Mera, and a plan began to take form in my mind. I

spoke of it to my friend and together we worked out the details of it and considered the difficulties it presented. It was a bold plan, one that required perfection of execution to be brought to a successful conclusion.

"We were nearly ready to make our first preparatory moves when we were unexpectedly interrupted—an interruption that caused us to change our minds about a number of things, and which ultimately brought about the real success of our revised plan.

"Naturally, with the Hu-men roving about as many of them do, it was inevitable that they should find our two buildings, and become curious about them. We were not, however, prepared for their reaction to them.

"Usually, as you know, the Hu-men are afraid of us. Well, somehow these conceived the notion that when we were in the buildings we were approachable, and they came in droves. They stood about outside, and I had to erect a stone wall around the plant house to keep them from trampling down the gardens I had planted and ruining all my nursery stock. I made it clear to them by means of threats and outright punishment, that they were not to enter the enclosure unless I said so, and I admitted only those who had learned where the garden plots were and which plants were not to be stepped upon.

"My friend had a similar experience with his building and its contents. Then, not long after things had quieted down a bit

and we were able to pursue our studies in a more normal fashion, we noticed that Hu-men would come in little groups to the enclosure gates, and leave nearby small handfuls of one kind or another of plants like those they knew to be growing inside. Usually those who had been occasionally allowed in carried the plant, and the others followed along to see him leave it.

"It was a charming custom until they took it up at my friend's building. There they brought carcasses of animals and left them at his gate. The situation then became annoying.

"'It seems the least they could do,' he said to me, 'would be to cook them for me so they wouldn't smell!'

"I pointed out the regrettable fact that these simple creatures had not yet mastered the art of controlling flame.

"'So they haven't,' he said, with a far-off look. 'I wonder what they would do with it if I taught them how to manage it?'

"The next day I saw him with a group of Hu-men about him, whacking together a couple of the sort of stones that act as a fairly good conductor for fire. In a minute or two he had a blaze up and going. Of course, the Hu-men were terrified at first. Then he got one or two of them to try it, and before the day was over he had them making flames all over the place. He built a kind of incinerator over against his gatepost, and taught them to pile it full of wood and to throw the animals they

brought to him into it. There was no stopping their bringing in the animals, and it was much better that way. Besides, the Hu-men appeared to enjoy it all very much.

"After they had hurt themselves a few times with their new-found destroyer, they came to respect it a little more, and now they delegate its manufacture to specific members of the tribe. Anyone else caught creating a flame is treated to their own brand of violent and effective justice.

"At the beginning we thought of the Hu-men who came to our buildings more or less as 'pets'. We refrained from taking them for Mera and did our hunting elsewhere. Then, one trip, when we had worked at our favorite occupations longer than we had intended, we did take two of the Hu-men to fill out the load. There was simply no time to do anything else under the circumstances, so we chose two husky specimens on the way back to the machine. We left the chemical aggregates where they lay, of course. We had no idea what the other Hu-men would do with them.

"'Maybe that will keep them away for a while,' my friend said, as we left for Mera.

"Upon our return, we were amazed, therefore, to see not only Hu-men but three buildings where only two had previously stood. The third building was crude in the extreme, and smaller than the other two. The enclosing wall was a mere ring of rubble, but somehow, the whole thing impressed us both. It was beyond belief.

These creatures did have creative intelligence, after all, even if it was of an imitative order. They had built, during our absence, what they no doubt thought was a duplicate of our two laboratories.

"Surprises were not over, however. When we left the machine a sort of delegation met us. They had covered themselves with leaves stuck together in imitation of our garments, and there was nothing to do but to follow them into their crude copy of our handiwork. A shocking sight met our eyes. There, just inside of the rough excuse for a wall, were two incinerators patterned after the one built by my friend to receive their animal offerings. The incinerators were heaped with dry wood, and on top of the wood, wrapped in long grass and reeds—undoubtedly to keep them from falling apart—lay the chemical 'bodies' of the two men we had taken. At a sign from one of the males (I recognized him as an older specimen who had often been in and out of my enclosure) a group of men kindled a flame in the wood. Both blazes rapidly consumed their dreadful burdens, and a good thing it was, too, that they did it thoroughly!

"I guess we're supposed to be pleased!" my friend exclaimed. So we went about among the Hu-men making signs of pleasure.

"Well, aren't you glad they cleaned it up?" I countered, as, touching them on their heads, we went from one to another. This seemed to please them and throw them into fits of ecstasy, and it gave

my friend a wonderful idea. He stood up on the wall and addressed them in their own crude and bestial language (which, I am happy to say, we have improved for them since that time). He promised them a great deal of head-touching and other such favors, if they would go out into the forest and catch other Hu-men males, and bring them to us in good condition. They could, he promised, then have the chemical parts to burn.

"They were quite delighted, and they have never failed us since. Sometimes, I believe, they even bring us one of their own number with a load. It seems that they have formed the odd notion that it's a very great honor to be 'taken up,' and if we took every hunter that begged for the favor we would very soon have no one left for the job. We have devised weapons suited to their mentality, and have taught them certain arts and crafts. On the whole we have improved their condition greatly since we arrived."

Aza left off for a moment, and Hoth asked:

"Why did you go solid?"

Aza spread his hands.

"Isn't it obvious?" he inquired.

"My interest is here, not in Mera, as I told you. I simply allowed the chemical elements to become fixed the better to pursue my experiments." He smiled at the two men as though awaiting another question.

"What do you want of us?" demanded Xent.

Aza looked pained. Before he

spoke he allowed the pained expression to relax into one of great beneficence.

"My boy," he said, "I am far more interested in giving you both a wonderful opportunity, the like of which I assure you can be had nowhere else, than I am in 'getting,' as you so tactlessly infer, anything from you. In this community everybody works at something, and as guests here you will be expected to help with the Hu-men now and then. It will provide the community with your proper share of the labor, and at the same time you will be learning more about our way of life, and—" he paused significantly "—about our enjoyments."

"In what way 'help with the Hu-men'?" Xent persisted.

Aza sighed and relaxed again into the chair from which he had half risen.

"It's very simple," he said. "You will not be allowed to become solid. You will be asked to go to the burning place now and then and walk out of the field of an old machine at appropriate intervals during one of their endless dances. None of us can do that any more, and the Hu-men are impatient about it. Usually newcomers to our group are more than glad to perform this little service for us, while they can. Unfortunately, however, most of them finally decide to go solid themselves, which leaves us in our present position. Hence, your capture. Hence, my humble request. We would like to continue to supply the labor markets of Mera—but not, as you may

understand, by our own effort."

He rose to go, and the two men watched him leave without moving from their places.

"There's a great deal we don't know, still, Xent," Hoth reflected. "What do you say we play his game until we have a chance to find out a little more about what's going on around here?"

Xent laughed.

"Good old Hoth! Always on the practical side. Since I can't for the life of me figure out anything else we can possibly do, I heartily agree. How do we notify Aza that we are almost willing to become a couple of minor Gods?"

Kad was uneasy as the column of hunters drew near the spot where he had slain the man whose weapons and clothing he now possessed. He slowed his pace allowing himself to drop well behind the next man on the trail. If there was to be trouble, that distance would be a distinct advantage. On the other hand, if all went well, he could easily make it up again. Nothing happened, however, as they passed the place where he had dragged the man off the trail. The night-hunting beasts of prey had added their own strong odors to the man-smell, and the strangers, intent now upon returning home, sped by. Not a head was turned toward the growlings in the underbrush. Animals feeding along the trail are no new thing in the forest.

Kad breathed easier then until he thought of the treeless valley ahead. What would hide him

there, a strange face among the hunters? Besides, once he was out in the moonlight, Ulu or one of the other captives would be almost certain to recognize him. Here indeed was a problem, and one that would not wait too long for its solution. He reflected that even the speech of these people was strange to him. There were a few words that he recognized, but there were many more that were entirely meaningless to him.

If only the moon were not so bright he might dare to cross the valley with the others by doing what he had done in the forest—trailing along behind and saying nothing. But out in the valley, although the grass was head-high in places, there were other places where it was not, and everywhere along the trail the moonlight would cut through and reveal him to all the others.

Obviously he could not go on among them. Yet they had Ulu, and he wanted Ulu. In addition, there were the other hunters of his tribe who undoubtedly wanted their freedom . . .

It was a most serious problem, requiring much thought. He was still thinking about it when they came to the end of the forest and trotted out into the rolling grass country of the valley. Near the forest, the grass was still very high, and Kad decided to travel a little further with his unsuspecting companions. He reached this decision by the simple course of not having decided anything else, and he followed the men ahead for another mile or so.

Then, quite without warning, the grass fell away to a mere stubble on either side of the trail. A fire had burned there, and the bright moon illuminated the charred area with an all-revealing radiance. Involuntarily, Kad halted. At the scrape and jingle of his sudden stop the man ahead turned quickly around and faced him. They stared at one another for a moment, then the man spoke, using a number of those strange words Kad was unable to understand.

Without answering, Kad raised the point of his spear and lunged at the man. The stranger sidestepped easily and shouted something that sounded like a warning. Kad, still off balance from his first unsuccessful thrust, whirled to the right and tried again. This time the point of his spear grazed the man's thigh, and with a cry of rage he charged Kad. This time, however, Kad was wiser, and he stepped aside, at the same time instinctively swinging his own spear down like a great club across the other men's shaft. Down went the point, and Kad leaped over it just in time to avoid another wicked thrust from one of the three hunters who had come in answer to the danger call.

Kad had made up his mind to live. He had seen what the spears could accomplish in the way of capturing and killing people, and he had no wish to become the subject of another demonstration of either magic. Still clinging to his own 'long club' he turned and dashed back along the trail toward

the forest. In Kad's tradition it was not termed cowardice to turn and flee when outfaced by superior armament. Live a little longer—and fight again, was more compatible with the philosophy of his people.

Half-way between the burned ground and the first line of trees something blocked the trail ahead of Kad. It was something that snarled and menaced with deep-throated growls, and it did not move out of the way. Again Kad came to a sudden stop. He caught a flash of moonlight on tawny hide, and the white gleam of hungry, sabre fangs. The tiger growled again and crouched to spring. Kad's pursuers were close behind him now, but they had not seen the tiger. What they saw was Kad, standing still in the trail, and they increased their speed. The first man loosed his spear in a perfect throw, but at that instant, Kad threw himself forward, face down in the trail and the tiger sprang.

The animal shot into the air, and the force of his stupendous leap carried him over the prostrate Kad. The point of the oncoming spear laid open the huge cat's side, as he leaped to meet it in midair. The face of the man who had launched the spear twisted in horror, and he tried to throw himself out of the path of the flying beast. But the action had gone too fast, the timing was too close, and he fell to the ground under the body of the sabre-tooth.

The other pursuers had more time to take in the situation. They

left the trail, and before Kad could collect his wits and get to his feet, a spear man stood in the trail ahead of him, prodding him to rise. The cold point punctured the skin of his chest, and he backed up a step. There was no getting away from that killing metal, for when he stepped the man stepped with him. Kad growled, and was answered by the tiger. The beast, too, faced a ring of spears. Then two more men appeared out of the tall grass and bound Kad so deftly and so quickly that he hardly understood what had happened to him. They forced him to push his way through the grass, back around the tiger, where they were joined again, further down the trail, by the other men. They were not killing tigers under a late moon—not those men. They had no wish to offend the Great Tiger, so they left his devotee where he was, in the trail, mumbling the remains of their companion, and gave thanks to the deity of tigers for delivering this new captive into their hands.

They kept Kad apart from the other prisoners. They thought he did not belong with them since he wore the dress of one of the Hu-men of Hur, although he did not appear to have their speech. They had been instructed carefully. This one, they were bringing in to be questioned. The others could be taken by the Hur people and there would be many burnings in the temple!

All through the remainder of the night they followed the ever-widening trail down the broad

valley, and in the morning, just as it was light, they reached the outskirts of the settlement called Hur.

Hoth and Xent found the food compartment well stocked with an excellent supply of fine Meravian dainties.

"At least," Xent approved, "they intend to feed us well." They set out a meal for themselves that had everything for a High Control banquet except the music and flowers. Etiquette forbade the discussion of practical affairs during the consumption of food, and it was like Hoth that he should insist upon observing the rule, even here.

When they had finished eating, it was he who took up the thread of their thought and put it into words.

"Creatures like Aza," he said, "should be exterminated."

Xent was less sure that such a drastic course was entirely necessary, or, in the long run, effective.

"They have a right to their life here, if they want it, but I do agree that they ought to place themselves under the jurisdiction of Control. I don't approve of this kind of hiding and preying upon the machines and trade. It is most unworthy."

"Unworthy!" Hoth snorted. "Unworthy begins far back of that! They have deliberately and willingly become such slaves of chemical sensation that they have gone solid—and the lowest Meravian citizen has always, since the foundation of Control, held himself above that kind of debasing

experimentation."

"Wait a minute Hoth," protested Xent. "Even Control admits that it had a hard time stamping out the vice that existed when it first assumed authority over Mera. The pleasure machines used to come down to the chemical surface with loads of thrill-hunters, who would take excursions into the atmosphere and remain out until the ultimate possible moment—and beyond. There are stories of people who came back to Mera sick from the violent extraction of too much chemical stuff. I suppose, from what you tell me, it had begun to solidify because they had over-stayed the limit. People became fiends for it and came back again and again. Control has tried to abolish the pleasure machines, but I have heard rumors that they are still being sent down here and there, especially from the Balang and Lipaga quadrants—and who knows what the big Draminians are doing? Certainly not Control, for all its professions of omnipotence."

Hoth stared at him.

"May I remind you Xent," he said evenly, "that no good citizen of Mera listens to such tales?" Xent stared back, but he did not apologize. Tension gathered in the room until Xent broke it with a laugh. "Here we are spouting about citizenship," he said, "when our first concern ought to be how to get home!"

Hoth was not hopeful.

"Our only chance would seem to be to make our way aboard some machine that stops here for

a load of Hu-men. Then, when we get back to Mera, we can report this so-called colony—we know its position now—and Control can deal with Aza and his fellow renegades."

"Spoken like a righteous citizen!" Xent applauded. "And now, I, for one, shall rest. As I recall, those couches aren't so bad."

They were awakened by the soft voice of Aza calling their names. He was standing behind a roller-table upon which an appetizing Meravian breakfast steamed enticingly.

"I thought we might have our breakfast together," he explained, "and talk a little more."

After a refreshing sleep, Xent found the ruler of Hur far less disturbing than he remembered him, and sat down gladly to enjoy the meal set out for them. Hoth, however, remained obviously hostile, although he accepted the excellently prepared dishes that were offered him. Nothing in Aza's manner indicated that he was at all aware of Hoth's impolite behavior, and when they could eat no more, he began to speak of serious things.

"I should be honored," he told them, "if you gentlemen would accompany me on a tour of our little city."

"Delighted!" said Hoth, acidly. It was the first word he had spoken since Aza's arrival. Aza smiled at him benignly and continued: "First I must warn you that here we are only partially civilized. We exist without many of the bless-

ings of Meravian life. However, we have learned to provide ourselves with other blessings in place of them, and on the whole we are inclined to think we have made a good bargain."

"You need not be alarmed, as you walk about with me, that you will solidify. Here and there about the city we have located eliminating fields, taken from traveling machines. At intervals you will be able to step into one or another of these and refresh yourselves. There is absolutely no danger, I assure you.

"Another thing, as you look upon the citizens of Hur, you must remember that no one is here against his will. All of them either volunteered to come, as members of the first group who came according to the plan, or they are visitors who grew to like our way of life and decided to remain among us. Now shall we go?"

They stepped out of the machine into the half-light of very early morning. It was as though they had come up out of the Earth itself, for the door, from the outside, resembled a boulder set into a sandstone cliff eighty or ninety feet high. The machine in which they had spent the night was buried, then, deep under ground. No wonder the searchers had found no trace of machines if this was what had happened to the lot of them! The ground sloped gently downward toward a landscape of tree-covered dune-shaped hills. Beyond, a river sparkled in the early light as it meandered southward, and fur-

ther toward the east range of magnificent mountains turned gold with the first touch of sunlight.

"How far are we from the city?" Xent inquired. Aza laughed. "We are near the heart of it," he said, and strode off down the slope toward the nearest dune. The two men had no other choice but to follow him, since he alone could lead them to the purifying field of some machine where they might rid themselves of the heavy atoms that had already begun to attach themselves to every part of their bodies.

At the base of a large tree, Aza paused and stamped upon the hard ground. A few feet away a section of the hillside dropped inward, and Aza walked into the tunnel that opened up behind it, motioning for the other two to follow him. When they were inside they saw that the whole hill was quite hollow. Parts of old traveling machines had been installed to perform various functions that would have surprised their original designers. The floor was fused from the sandy soil of the original dune, into a kind of glassy substance, brownish and very pleasant to walk upon.

Toward one end of the great room, where there were many chairs set in several rows around a square table, there was a gathering of the blue men, and it was toward this gathering that Aza led Hoth and Xent. He showed them where they might be seated, saying:

"Excuse me a moment, will you

please? There are certain affairs of business that demand my attention."

The assembled men greeted Aza with much ceremony. It was evident that not only was he ruler among them, but that his power was supreme. Xent counted nearly two hundred men while the rite of greeting was going on. As soon as the last ritual words were said, the men took seats and Aza spoke:

"It has been our constant practice, from which we have never deviated, to ask that each newcomer into Hur swear to this body of brethren here assembled, an oath of secrecy. We of Hur have survived against the Council of Mera only by virtue of our effective concealment. It is our wish to continue to survive, as free men, building upon the chemical surface our structure of civilization according to the marvelous possibilities which we believe to be inherent in it. We have become brothers to the race of Hu-men, and when we have educated them sufficiently, it is our purpose to take them into our councils, in the hope that they, in time, may achieve a level of development that will assure them recognition in the councils of a better and greater Mera, as citizens of a double Empire of the two habitable surfaces, with full rights and privileges.

"As builder of the first chemical structure ever raised upon Earth by the hand of man, I, as Master of these brethren, possess the right to administer this binding oath. Hoth and Xent, come forward."

Bewildered by this sudden turn of events, the two men rose and stood before Aza.

"You will repeat after me the words which follow, swearing by your own names . . ."

"I will swear nothing!" Hoth burst out. "And I will repeat nothing!"

Xent was silent, but a shocked murmur ran around the gathering of men. Aza remained unperturbed. He addressed Hoth:

"Have you considered well what acceptance among us might mean to you?"

"I have," Hoth stormed, "and I find the possibility abhorrent to me. You are nothing, all of you, but a depraved and besotted host of fiends, and I compare you to the ghouls of the middle strata that feed endlessly upon the bodies of our dead! No! you are worse than they, for you have come to live in the lowest reaches of the atmospheric, consorting with the slime that is born within it, giving yourselves up to debauchery—becoming solid!"

Aza turned to Xent: "And you?" he queried.

Xent was incapable of speech. Surges of feeling possessed him, and would not crystallize into formed, intelligible words. He realized that he should despise himself for not agreeing heartily with Hoth, but the fact was that he did not agree. True, there were some aspects of the picture that he did not understand, but he had a heart for adventure, and the right of these men to live as they chose seemed to him to be indisputable.

He admired them for their courage and for their aspiration.

"I will swear," he said, as soon as he could manage his voice.

Aza allowed himself the ghost of a satisfied smile and turned again to Hoth.

"And now?" he asked.

Hoth stared at Xent as though he could not believe his ears. He shook his head.

"I will not swear."

"Very well, then," Aza snapped, "If you will not swear, at least you shall hear in order that you may know what will happen to you if you divulge to a non-citizen as much as a single item of the information you may acquire among us, including, naturally, the location and appearance of Hur."

"Now, Xent," he continued, "repeat after me the words I say."

The oath was intricate, detailed, and terrible in its threats of dire penalty to anyone who broke it and divulged the secrets of the Hur-am, or "Sons of Hur" as they called themselves. It was long, and seemed much longer, repeated phrase by phrase in the silence of the vast underground hall, before the assembled Hur-am, who had, every one of them, heard and repeated that same awful obligation themselves. The voice of Aza took on power and majesty as he spoke the awesome words. When he reached the statement of the ultimate penalty, the vision was terrifying that they conjured up of the middle strata, where atmosphere laps against the under-surfaces of

Mera; that awful region that is neither the blessed outer-earth nor the great under-deep, the sea of teeming, chemical, atmospheric life; the layer of death where insane, ghoulish monsters creep and wallow and devour among the remnants of dead things that drift into that immense sargasso from the world above and from the world below it.

When it was over, Aza turned to Hoth.

"You have not taken our oath, and yet, because you have listened and because you know, it is binding upon you. Remember it, should you at any time feel tempted to talk about us and our deeds. I give you my promise that upon such revelation you shall be exiled to the middle strata as surely as though you had spoken the words and were one of us."

He made a sign, and two of the men rose from their places and led Hoth away. Xent was signed to remain, so he resumed his seat, wondering what was to be his next experience in this strangest of all strange adventures.

Hoth was no more than out of sight when a party of Hu-men dressed in bark-cloth garments and carrying bows and spears entered the chamber through another doorway. They escorted a Hu-man female who carried a young child in her arms. Faa was the only Hu-man woman Xent had ever seen and he recognized her instantly. She looked worn and tired, and she was obviously terribly frightened, but she bore herself with dignity and grace, and defi-

ance shone out of the shadows of her dark eyes.

The Hu-men brought Faa before Aza, who eyed her appraisingly and congratulated them upon their luck.

"Isn't she beautiful?" he asked of Xent.

Xent nodded. He did not volunteer the information that he had ever seen this woman before. He was watching events, and he did not wish to turn them in any way. If he was to learn the ways of this strange new world, he must also learn to allow things to happen in it, normally, and without his interference.

"We will preserve the child." Aza said to the Hu-men. "He can become a hunter to replace one of those who did not return from your expedition. For the present, leave him with his mother." To Xent he said: "You will study our life and customs for a while. This Hu-man female will be your fellow student. She will learn our language, if she is able, and you will learn hers, since it is desirable for you to know the Hu-man tongue. You will see her again tomorrow at the study rooms. Just now, however, it would be advisable for you to step this way and shake out those ugly little chemical atoms before they become securely lodged in your body framework."

Xent followed Aza out of the council room into a smaller chamber that was another cabin taken from a traveling machine. He had remained out in the atmosphere for rather a long time, and the loss

of accumulated chemical substance was not accomplished without some attendant pain. After a while, however, his head cleared and he felt better. So! he thought, the beautiful Hu-man was to be his schoolmate! Stupid old Hoth! What had the Council or Control ever done for him that he should set himself on fire with patriotism and miss an adventure that might turn out to be much more interesting than anything else that might happen to a man in a thousand years.

Aza had remained silent while Xent wrestled with the sensations produced by the field. Finally he said:

"Some day you'll think your precious flexibility isn't worth it, particularly after you have learned a trick or two."

"I wouldn't want to be permanently burdened with all that weight!" Xent replied.

Aza smiled.

"There are," he said, "compensations."

The next few days passed rapidly for everyone except Hoth. He refused to speak to Xent again, so he was left alone in their original "apartment" and Aza gave Xent quarters in another part of the city. Hoth was not treated badly. Violence was not a policy with these people. They preferred an attempt at education, even under extreme difficulties, and they found Hoth a good student in spite of his sullen attitude. He planned to learn all he could about these "criminals" as he

called them, in order to make a full report to Control when he should be able to escape. Aza provided him with books, and he spent his time reading and turning over plans.

Xent was finding his adventure pleasant indeed. His duties were not arduous, as Aza promised, and consisted mainly, for the first few days, in helping four of the Humen "tame" the beautiful female, Faa. The two men and the two women delegated for this work were experienced in it. They had done the same job many times over, and appeared to know exactly what to do and say to put Faa at her ease, arouse her curiosity, and finally to elicit cooperation from her. She learned very rapidly and Xent was soon able to exchange a little speech with her. His presence seemed to make her less afraid. This puzzled Aza, until Xent finally told him where they had seen each other before and related the circumstances of that meeting. Aza laughed.

"I suppose that gives you some sort of prior right, Xent, if you want it."

"I have no wish to keep a slave," Xent replied.

"No," Aza corrected him. "Not a slave."

Xent looked at him for a long minute before he understood what Aza was telling him.

"Great Tahl!" he exclaimed. "You mean you marry them?"

Aza nodded.

"Are you disappointed in us?"

"I don't know," Xent said somewhat cautiously. "Possibly I don't

know what to think about it yet . . ."

"Well, no matter," said Aza. "You will come to a conclusion sooner or later."

"Are there—" Xent hesitated—"are there—children?"

"Certainly," replied Aza. "That is another of the compensations I spoke to you about."

Xent was silent and Aza continued.

"There are more than two-hundred ex-Meravians in Hur. Nearly every one of them has chosen to remain here because some Hu-man female became more attractive to him than the prospects of returning to his overdelicate Meravian associations. The heavier atoms exert a tonic effect upon the emotions, Xent, and we happen to think Control is in the wrong with its continual emphasis upon the cultivation of an entirely mental life. Here we seek a balance and harmony among all the various factors that combine to form the self."

Xent was still inclined to withhold his judgment, and Aza did not urge him to make up his mind. He, too, was experienced in the art of handling strangers within the gates of Hur.

Kad, also, began to have an exciting time in Hur as soon as he learned that the men who came and talked to him did not intend to kill him. After three days spent in fruitless explorations of every inch of the room's interior surface, he gave up the idea of trying to escape and entertained himself

with the mechanical "toys" with which his captors provided him. There was the picture-maker, which gave out pictures and sounds. One of the Hu-men who came regularly to visit him would make the machine perform its magic, and then, as the picture formed, he would repeat the sound that went with it. He invited Kad to repeat the sounds with him, and after Kad overcame a bit of his embarrassment, they chanted with the machine. It made Kad feel good, as if he had performed a kind of miracle, and his joy was unbounded when he realized that the sounds he had learned to reproduce could be used as words in addressing the strange Hu-men. Now he could ask them more about their mysterious weapons.

They were very willing to answer all his questions, and in return he told them everything about the tribe, how he was chieftain of it, how and where they lived, how many people there were—everything there was to tell he told in exchange for knowledge concerning the mighty weapons.

He mentioned Ulu, and told the Hu-men for what purpose he had followed them into the valley.

"Bring Ulu to me here," he begged. "Give us spears, and we will fight."

The Hu-men refused.

"Ulu and your hunters will go to Mera," they said, "and become servants of the Blue People. It is a very great honor. It is also a great honor to become a hunter for them, as we are."

engaging experiment. It would be folly, as well as unpardonable audacity on his part, to oppose it.

"Perhaps," he thought, "it is the stimulation arising from too frequent exposure to the heavy atoms. I must remember to visit a cleansing field more often hereafter." But he said nothing to Aza.

Aza paused to give a brief order to a passing Hu-man, and by the time they reached the apartment allotted to Kad, two Hu-man guards were waiting near the door with Faa. Without speaking, Aza opened the entrance and motioned Faa to enter. The guards followed her closely, but there was no need for concern. When the two Mer-avians entered the room the little drama was already nearly over.

At the sight of Faa, Kad took two steps forward. Faa stood still where she was, and he stopped uncertainly.

He spoke her name, softly:
"Faa!"

She came toward him, then, and as Xent watched them together he suddenly knew it was not entirely the heavy atoms that produced the odd sensation that had been troubling him. Somewhat shocked with his own reactions he turned to find Aza watching him curiously—not quite smiling, rather, radiating satisfaction.

"Should find a field," Xent muttered. "Been out quite a while."

Aza nodded, and the satisfaction turned into an infinitely comforting understanding as he led Xent out of the room and signed for the two guards to follow them.

After the field had done its work, and his body was free again from the clinging chemical atoms, Xent asked to be taken to Hoth.

"Perhaps," he insisted, "if I talked to him again he could be convinced that you, the Hur-am, are not a menace to the welfare of Mera."

Aza was not so sure.

"Hoth," he said, "has been exhibiting the manners and, I regret to say, the intelligence of a tiger. He roars at those who feed him, and he refuses to listen to those who would reason with him. You, he particularly despises at the moment. I must advise against your disturbing him further. However, if you insist, I will not deny your wish. Go to him, but take a weapon and a guard."

"Hoth is my friend," Xent replied. "I would not carry a weapon against him."

"Go then," said Aza, "and learn what you will not be taught."

When Xent had left the room, Aza summoned a guard and instructed the man:

"Follow Xent at a distance. Be sure he does not see you, but give your life, if you must, to protect him."

Xent walked directly to the concealed room where he had first awakened to the life of Hur, and where Hoth was now kept prisoner. He opened the entrance and went in without announcing himself. Hoth was lying on one of the beds, but leaped to his feet at Xent's soft spoken greeting and faced his old companion.

"Get out!" he snarled.

For this reason I ask you to return her to me. We will live here, and I will be your hunter."

Once the words were out, Kad trembled at his own temerity. But Aza did not appear to be offended.

"Should we consult the woman in this matter, Kad?"

"Bring her to me," Kad replied. "We will consult her here."

A curious expression of triumph crossed Aza's face. He said. "She will be brought to you." He left in search of Xent.

Xent was inspecting the zoological collections for the hundredth time.

"Azal!" he exclaimed when he saw the leader of the Hur-am, "Why will you not tell me the name of that god among you who has developed this profusion of creatures? It would please me more to do something like this—or to help with it—than it would to rise to the High Seat of Control! He has transplanted nearly all the animals of Mera, and here they are, loaded with chemical substance, solid, and still living—reproducing and developing new characteristics under chemical-surface conditions. It is incredible! And the mutations! I must know him, and I must learn how he does it. The only form of life I have not seen in these laboratories is the Hu-man. Tell me, has your wizard never worked with them?"

On the way back to Kad's quarters Aza outlined his project to Xent.

"We have," he said, "in this little Hu-man family, the perfect

material for our first real test of Hu-man ingenuity and intelligence. It has been my thesis that these creatures can be developed into a race that will in time become superior to our own—superior, because it is endowed with all the rich experience of a chemical environment which forces the development of that factor in the self in which most of us in Mera are deficient. I refer to the all-conquering Will, which operates so beautifully under the sense of extreme separateness imposed by chemical life.

"Until now I have felt unable to launch my experiment for the simple reason that no Hu-man had been found with sufficient mental development of a certain sort to warrant it. Now, in this Kad, and in his woman, Faa, we have the stirrings of the type of mental activity for which I have been searching. It is proposed that they be taken to a fertile part of the Earth and taught the rudiments of agriculture. If these two can survive that manner of life, it may prove possible then to make this whole surface into one vast garden, verdant and flowering, delightful to visit, and a perfect environment in which to develop the wonderful Hu-man race of which I dream."

Aza's eyes lighted with excitement as he reviewed his dream, but Xent was silent. An odd feeling spread through his body when he thought of Faa, and he fought down an entirely irrational desire to resist the plan. Stupid, of course. It was an excellent plan, a most

"Give me weapons and let me go back to my tribe," Kad implored them. "They have no hunters now, and how will they live?"

Again he was denied.

"Only those who remain here may possess the weapons."

Kad thought for a long time about it. Then he said:

"I will remain here. Give me the weapons. Tell your chief my people will die if their hunters are not returned to them, but tell him also that I will remain here and hunt for him, if he will give me weapons."

When the message was delivered to Aza he was delighted.

"That man is mine!" he exclaimed. "Grant his wishes: send home his hunters, there is plenty of time to gather up a few others to take their places in the next load for Mera. I can use that independent Hu-man, and a few males is no price to pay for his good will!"

The Hu-man messenger bowed.

"There is one more thing," he said. "He tells us the woman, Faa, is his."

"I think you bring me the best of news!" Aza beamed. "Inform this man of mine that I shall visit him tomorrow."

Kad, proud of his new knowledge was determined to show no fear in the presence of this tall, strange being who stood before him. He drew himself up to his full height, aping the dignity and poise of Aza, standing silently as the other Hu-men had instructed

him. Aza should speak first, if there was to be speaking, he had been told. Therefore he waited.

Aza watched him closely, taking in through his many senses the complex of thought and emotion boiling behind the rigid exterior. Kad was so carefully presenting to him, and he smiled.

"Are you satisfied with your position here?" he asked, in Hu-man language.

Kad made the head-sign of assent, but did not trust his voice to answer.

"Your hunters have gone home. Because you have shown mercy to an enemy you have gained my pleasure and I have done this for you. Now those who teach you tell me you claim the woman, Faa."

Once more Kad made the head-sign.

"Have you been acquainted with our custom here, with regard to women?" Aza inquired.

Again Kad nodded.

"Speak, man," Aza encouraged him. "You have no reason to be afraid of me." He directed a flood of energy toward Kad, pitching it at the level of admiration, and the Hu-Man's stiff manner melted in a moment. He felt able to speak again.

"Great One," he said. "I have learned many things from the superior Hu-Men who live with you. I have learned that you keep our young females and that they give you children: that the Hu-men are proud that this should happen. But because the child of Faa is my son, I could feel no pride if Faa were to be kept here.

"Is this the ritual of friendship?" asked Xent.

"You are no friend of mine if you are a friend of the Hur-am." Hoth spat out the words as if they were bitter to him.

Xent kept his voice at a gentle, persuasive level:

"Perhaps you are mistaken in your judgment of them, Hoth. Will you listen to me while I tell you something you may not know about them?"

"Get out!" Hoth again demanded.

"I can get out, indeed," Xent reminded him, "but you cannot. And if you did get out, how could you return to Mera? Accumulate a charge of chemical material, and then suddenly divest yourself of it by some means, hoping to work your way through the terrible middle levels before you accumulated another? Let me remind you that men have gone mad before they found their way out of those mists and horrors and up again through the passages under Mera into the pure sunshine of our happy land.

"And once there, would you not be considered an exile, a thing contaminated by contact with this surface world? Who upon the Council or in the Control would listen to your lunatic ravings of a Meravian colony on the Chemical level? No! You would be condemned to what life you could find until your years were up and you made the ascent, alone, and without ceremony, in some underland between the middle levels and Mera—if, indeed, you did not

fall prey to the ravenous ghouls!

"I come as your friend, Hoth, to offer you an infinitely better life—one with possibilities of which you have never dreamed!"

Hoth looked about for something he could use as a weapon.

"You will make your ascent here, Xent, if you don't leave at once!"

Xent looked at him coolly and shook his head.

"I will not go until you have heard me out." He sat down in the large chair and watched calmly as Hoth's hand closed over the side of the big dish half filled with woa fruit. He watched the red fruit roll over the floor as Hoth took up the dish and advanced toward him.

Outside, the guard Aza had set to watch over Xent was growing nervous. Xent had disappeared into the room where the mad Meravian was kept, and he had not yet reappeared. He had been gone too long, the guard decided. He went to the hillside, and performed the ritual he knew would cause the door to open. When the boulder swung inward he walked to the entrance and stood peering into the field, looking for the transparent shadows that would indicate the presence of the two men from Mera. He had not found them when something rushed passed him and knocked him off his feet. As he went down, his head struck the side of the door, and a disturbance that looked like a rapidly moving whirlwind, gathering dust at its center, sped around the base of the dune to-

ward the edge of the city.

An unscheduled, and warning hum, high, droning and insistent snatched Aza's thought from all further consideration of Xent and Hoth for the moment. A machine had landed without announcement! He hurried to the landing. Ched's machine was being towed out of sight, and Ched himself was directing operations with an urgency that was quite unlike his usual easy-going good humor. He refused to greet Aza until the slab of hillside had moved up to conceal the landing entrance. When everything was in order, he motioned Aza aside from the other men present and said simply:

"It's happened. They know."

Aza turned to the others and issued a few brief orders.

"This is the emergency for which you have been prepared. Go to your places. No one is to go above-ground for any reason. Use the tunnels for any necessary travel between city sections, and maintain the alert until the safety signal is sounded."

"Now," he continued to Ched, "tell me your story."

"The Council has banned all atmosphere travel, pending a full investigation of the disappearances of machines and men — whatever that means. I didn't stay long enough to learn what plans, if any, they had made for searching the planet. Feeling is high, in Mera, but it is a feeling of fear, rather than of indignation, so the Council may be hard put to find crews for searching parties, unless

Control steps in and forces a selection of unwilling explorers. In that case I believe we will be safe enough. You should hear some of the tales of alleged goings-on among the chemical vapors!"

Some of Ched's sense of fun was returning to him, but Aza drew him back to the important subject:

"How did you manage to get away—and were you followed?"

"I left for home," Ched laughed, "in my machine of course, and I guess I must have pulled the wrong lever. Odd how you sink out of sight sometimes when you do that in Mera."

Aza smiled in spite of his concern.

"Your friends are in conference together," he said. "Shall we join them? The younger, who likes us, by the way, is attempting to point out to the elder the justice and order of our deeds, and the possibilities of a glorious future in our way of life."

"Good Xent!" Ched approved. "But I'll wager he needs help with that project. I know Hoth. School, to Council, to Control is his program, and friendship be scuttled if it interferes. Let's go."

They came up through the tunnel into Hoth's prison-room. A quick glance told Aza most of the story, and he moved to close the entrance and revive the Human guard. Ched performed the operation of calling the mind of Xent back into its earthly vehicle, and in a few minutes he was ready to sit up and answer questions.

"So," said Ched, when the facts

were all collected, "do I go get him?"

Aza was undecided.

"Is there time? You can't go without a machine unless you want to risk permanent solidification—and Xent . . . ?"

"Tell me what to do," Xent interrupted, "and I will go. Ched can do the appearing at the Temple, now that he is here. I . . ." he hesitated, and looked from Aza to Ched and then to the floor. "I think I'd rather enjoy the solid life, after all."

Ched roared with laughter, but Aza cut him short.

"Enough!" He turned to Xent. "You have the Rings of the Net, and the ray from a sphere will paralyze Hoth now, as it would a Hu-man. You will be able to trail him by the disturbances his passage has created in the atmosphere. Find him, and bring him back to me, but be quick. There is no need to tell you what you must do if you are sighted by a Council Machine."

Xent bowed in a brief ritual of departure and left without another word. Ched chuckled as he gathered up the scattered fruit that lay about the room.

"He'll fetch him back," he said, "and we can try again."

"Xent has expressed a desire to work with you in your animal culture—I haven't told him who is responsible for the laboratory that fascinates him so much, of course. That is a surprise I have been saving for him. And I have a surprise for you. Two Hu-men, a male and a female, have finally

met the mental requirements we set for the great experiment. They are compatible—in fact they have already produced one child—and so as soon as this present trouble is settled we can begin our co-ordinated project.

Ched stood still, his eyes bright with anticipation:

"Think of it!" he exclaimed. "A new stock: pure Hu-man, but given an opportunity for survival and development such as no other Hu-man stock has ever enjoyed. New forms of vegetation to nourish them and increase their strength and vitality. New animal forms for them to experiment with as they will. In one of their generations we will anticipate untold centuries of evolutionary history. We will endow the chemical Earth with a race that will be worthy of it!"

"Well spoken!" Aza applauded, with a phrase from the formal ritual of assent.

It was easy for Xent to trace the passage of Hoth through the atmosphere. Even after he began to feel the weight of the heavy atoms as they settled into the framework of his body, he was delighted to find that one of his three eyes retained its power of discerning non-chemical objects. He had no need of that subtle organ, however, when he found Hoth.

Hoth was weary. He had been out long enough to become very heavy, and the added weight was telling on his strength. Solidity could not be acquired suddenly without some discomfort and great

strain. Xent overtook him easily.

Hoth, to Xent's surprise, stopped without protest.

"I thought you might follow," he said "after you found me gone."

"Sorry," Xent replied. "I've come to take you back to Hur."

"You're wasting your time." Disappointment that was almost despair settled over Hoth, and Xent hated what he had to do.

Hoth saw Xent moving the rings into position to form the net that would remove the chemical atoms from his body and imprison him.

"No!" he growled, more to himself than to Xent, and with a sudden movement he snatched a primitive weapon from his belt and fell forward upon it with all his agonizing weight. Xent watched in stunned horror, while Hoth slowly withdrew his body from the inert chemical mass. He ran forward, arms extended with the net vibrating between them, just too late. Hoth hurt as he was, leaped upward and away from him. If he could climb to the higher levels of the atmosphere quickly enough, he would be free . . . free to fight his way through the middle levels, and possibly return to Mera—and exile.

Xent shivered with a strange new sensation as he bent to lift up the chemical remains of Hoth's visit to Hur. The image was so like the man himself! Every bodily detail reproduced with the infinite fidelity of Living Energy, that greatest of all craftsmen and the Master Technician of the Universe! But the consciousness com-

plex that was Hoth was gone. There remained only this replica, this memorial statue—already beginning to perish—to remind him of his friend. Xent caught for a brief time the feeling that must come to the Hu-men when one of their number made his first ascent, or was taken by a hunting party of Mera. But he shook off all feeling, and took up the corpse. That, at least, he could carry back to Hur—to what welcome from Aza and Ched he could not imagine. As he lifted the body, some writing material like that used in Hur fluttered to the ground. Blindly, he gathered that up, too, and staggered back toward the city, burdened with the relic of his friend.

Xent stood before Aza and waited for whatever might come. But again Aza proved himself a Lord of understanding.

"You have done what could be done," he said quietly. "Now be comforted by what I have to tell you. Ched is the man with whom you have expressed a desire to work. If you are still interested, you will assume your duties as his assistant today. You will be taught what we have learned, after which you will be expected to perform studies of your own. In the meantime you will assist with the coordinated experiment we are about to launch, including plants of my creation, animals of Ched's devising, and the Hu-man pair, Kad and Faa."

"Faa?" Xent's expression caused Ched's ready laughter to bubble up toward the surface again, but

he restrained it. "There are many others," he said gently, "and there is time. There is time for everything, and a new world, waiting for everything that we can give it. I am glad, Xent, very glad to make you my brother builder."

"But what of Hoth? What of the Council, whether he reaches them or not?"

Aza was reassuring.

"Hoth has chosen the way he will travel. He has elected to oppose us, and with or without the Council to approve and aid him he will do it, if he manages to survive. As for the Council, they move slowly, and they will not find us easily. We will have time, I think, to carry out our plans."

Xent looked again at the image of Hoth that was so like, yet so

unlike, the man himself.

"What had he written?" he asked.

Aza produced the writing-sheets Xent found with the body.

"Apparently he was making some sort of report, writing it to aid his memory when he should have a chance to deliver it to the Authority," he said and handed the sheets to Xent. The writing on the first page began in the middle of a sentence. Xent read only a little . . .

"And the Sons of God saw the Daughters of men that they were fair, and took unto them wives..."

He gave the papers back to Aza.

"I am glad," he said, "that I am one of the Hur-am."

THE END

QUICK, SHAVER, THE HOSE!

A VERY strange thing happened in Detroit the other day. It all happened in the backyard of John Sanders, Sr., who was washing his car and minding his own business. He was using a garden hose, and doing very well, thank you, when suddenly he discovered that the sound of running water was absent. Startled, he looked around to see his hose, nozzle first, squirming its way into the ground as though China were its goal. Hastily he pulled on it. It pulled back. It won the tug of war, and nearly pulled John Sanders with it. Exasperated, he grasped the other end of the hose, tied it to his car, and climbing into the driver's seat, drove off grimly. And went nowhere . . . Instead, the nasty hose merely tugged the harder and pulled the car within an inch of the hole.

Now, thought John Sanders, was the time to call for help. Six men responded, and together they tried to extract the pesky hose from its burrow. Car and six men failed miserably.

Nothing daunted, a major excavating

job was started, and after digging a hole nine feet across and eight feet deep, they finally forced the greedy earth to give up its prize.

City engineers, called in to solve the mystery, opined as how it must be quicksand. Via the scientific method it was discovered there was no quicksand. So they hazarded the guess that water, rushing from the nozzle of the hose, may have pushed the air and sand aside creating a vacuum which dragged the hose downward. None of them suggested trying to repeat the performance. All had a healthy respect for the hose.

Across the street a reader of *Amazing Stories* hastily sat down at his typewriter and reported the incident to its editor, Howard Browne. Said he: "Even hoses ain't safe no more with these blamed deroes. First thing we know, they'll be pulling city busses into the subway!"

Well, all we can say is that when a man can't even wash his car without being pestered by those little underground devils, it's really getting bad!

LETTERS

Bea Mahaffey

Having finished the first issue of *OTHER WORLDS*, I am now prepared to give you my opinion of same. Briefly, I think the magazine is sure to be a hit. By the next couple of issues you will definitely have gotten it headed in the direction you want, and I, personally, don't think you can miss.

The cover is an attention-getter, hut good! Future covers will have to go some to offer competition for this one.

Your stories were all rather good. I even liked Shaver's *Fall of Lemuria*, and that's quite an unusual statement for me to make.

Rog Phillips' story *The Miracle of Elmer Wilde* I enjoyed exceedingly. Irwin did a fine job on *Where No Foot Walks* and I'm looking forward to the sequel to *The Vengeance Of Martin Brand*. Don't keep us in suspense, man—hurry up and print the story. *Seven Come A'Lovin'* was a title that caught my eye at once, and as soon as I started the story—well, I always did have a weakness for screw-loose robots.

The inside illustrations were well done in most cases, with the exception of the picture for *Where No Foot Walks*. That one I didn't care for. But in all fairness the one on pages 38-39 was excellent.

In the story *Venus Trouble Shooter* just how did Elmer manage to cut operating expenses down to zero? Will we ever find out? Are we to be left dangling like that, or can we tune in next issue and learn the answer?

You've got a darn good mag as it stands, and we're expecting it to get better and better.

1616 Walnut St.,
Cincinnati, Ohio

How about this month's cover? We thought we'd try for realism this time, and we wonder if we've caught it? You'll get that sequel soon. You see, you'd have had it years ago except that Ziff Davis had a rule where you couldn't write for your own magazine—so we always had to use pennames. Trouble is, somebody was always finding out our pennames. But now the boss is also the editor, and goldarn if he isn't going to buy his own

stories, when they are good. And we trust your judgment on this one, Bea. We are flattered to know you remember Martin Brand after seven years. Well, your editor will continue to write stories under his G. H. Irwin pseudonym, and get a great kick out of it. Trouble is, literally dozens of writers have had stories published under that name. Take Where No Foot Walks, for instance. The original G. H. Irwin didn't write that one. In fact, Martin Brand was the last one we actually did ourselves. As for illustrations, we're trying to broaden our scope. Eventually, you'll find that we have the best illustrations in the field. Just try and stop us from getting them! Yes, Elmer's cute trick with power will be explained. OTHER WORLDS leaves no one dangling in the air.—Ed.

Dave Hammond

Congratulations! *OTHER WORLDS* is a SWELL magazine. *OTHER WORLDS* is unique in the fact that you intend to put in your magazine what the readers want. (I hope you weren't kidding.) I won't waste space commenting on the stories, though I thoroughly enjoyed each one. Incidentally, *Venus Trouble Shooter* had a glaring mistake in it. John Wiley, the author, insists that Venus does not rotate on any axis and yet also presents its same face to the sun. John just contradicted himself. I can guess at least two ways by which Elmer Smith could have cut his operational expenses. I hope OW can maintain the standard set by Volume 1, Number 1.

Suggestions: Whatever you do, dear editor, do not make the cover of OW the same boring thing some of the other mags do. You can guess what I mean. The best thing to do, I guess, is to follow the story. Malcolm Smith is a great artist and I'm glad to see him. Another thing, how about printing the number of words in each story, like *Amazing* does? Print long novels whenever you can get a good one; fans like long novels better than anything else. (At least I do.) I see you published a story by Shaver. This was not much of a story, as you pointed out, but I liked it. Howsoever, I hope you won't

go "overboard" on his stories. G. H. Irwin is a fine writer. I have read his *Lair Of The Grimalkin* and *Where No Foot Walks* is a sort of companion story to it. I thoroughly enjoyed both stories. *News Of The Month* starts out as a very interesting department. I hope it stays the way it is. *Personals* might help me round out my meagre collection of stf mags.

806 Oak Street,
Runnemede, N. J.

No, we weren't kidding. We are changing our plans every day to include some new suggestion by a reader. Believe us, we are getting some dandies! Yes, John Wiley ought to bone up on his astronomy, and we think he'll know from now on that if Venus presents the same face to the sun, it revolves once on its axis each year. Maybe John would like to know your two ways by which Elmer Smith could save operational expenses before he writes that story. Why don't you drop him a line? Heavens no, we won't make OTHER WORLDS' cover boring. We intend to spend a lot of time thinking about these covers, and we won't have an art director whose knowledge of science fiction goes only so far as misspelling the name to contend with. In many of the big houses, the art director is also a vice president, and consequently almost useless. As for printing the number of words in each story, glance at the contents page. It's a good idea in *Amazing*, so it's a good idea here! We'll also give you long novels, when we get good ones. As for Shaver, yes, we'll publish him. As for his *Mystery*, we'll handle that in *FATE* magazine. We predict that you'll find that Shaver can write some really terrific science fiction. As a matter of fact, we made a trip up to his farm the other day simply to tell him what we wanted from him (and we didn't hear any voices). Personally, we believe in Shaver, but that's personal. If you are interested in things like that, read *FATE*.—Ed.

Olie Adkins

I owe OW an apology. I passed up the first issue three days before. I finally gave up and bought a copy. I'll never pass up another one. This is SF at its best. All the authors seem to be in rare form, even Richard S. is passable. I think John Wiley is starting a series. His *Venus Trouble Shooter* was a very good start.

and I would like to hear from "Stanwoody Cripe" quite often. I suggest that you have cartoons, also. See you next issue.

Mojave Desert

Good heavens, Olie, is that all the address you have? Sure, you'll hear from Stanwoody Cripe again. And you'll get cartoons. Okay!—Ed.

J. Wollett

Your magazine in general was surprisingly well done for a first venture when I think of some of the other first issues I have read. I hope you will continue to fill OTHER WORLDS with fiction and not waste space on articles. Four of the stories were good. The first story was trash. One should be able to relax with a good story, but Shaver's disturb me.

I would not have thought Rog Phillips could write so well, judging from all of his other stories, as *The Miracle Of Elmer Wilde*. The humor in *Seven Come A'Lovin'* was well put. Not enough of this has been done in science fiction. Anything can be improved with a touch of humor once in awhile.

You did not get the true flavor of *Astounding* in any of the stories, although Wiley came nearer to it than Phillips. But I feel assured it will be in future numbers.

No address

We'll get more humor, you can count on it. And we think you'll be able to relax with Shaver's next story. Why not give us a chance to prove what an editor can do with a writer when he has a free hand? Maybe you'll be pleasantly surprised.—Ed.

Elliott Levene

What with you jangling my 2 2/5 bits in your jeans for the first issue of OTHER WORLDS, I am not surprised that you are delighted to meet me. Likewise . . . I think. (I really do.)

Keep a fairly good-sized letter column, but don't let a few "letter-writers" monopolize it. Try to print letters that contribute something to the mag or to science fiction, and are controversial.

As for your policy of having one of each type of science fiction story, it's a good idea, but I doubt if you will please everybody even this way. Incidentally, I hope this policy does not go the way of all good intentions and New Years' resolutions.

All in all, you did okay. The makeup is exceptionally fine. The stories were appropriately representative as you said they would be, and I was satisfied (though little more) with them.

Good luck, and remember you get my 35c every other month, come what may.

86 Harding Ave.,
Lynbrook, L. I., N. Y.

Do you think this letter section is about right? As for that price tag, we intend to deliver more than 35c worth to you before we really hit our stride. That's the main purpose of the 2 2/5 bits, as you put it; to make it possible to give you a really good magazine not held down to trash by that 25c price tag. You know, everything in the world has gone up over a hundred percent what it cost before the war — except magazines. And many magazines are folding with wonderful sales, just because no matter how many you sell, you are only making peanuts. So, we think we would rather sacrifice a few sales, and produce a magazine not restricted by a two-bit monster who gobbles everything good that comes along with the bugaboo "costs too much to put in." Besides, there are two other sf mags on the stands with that same price tag—and if you think they're going to have it so easy from now on, just watch 'em. We intend to force them to give you readers more in their magazines too! Somebody's got to start the ball rolling, and it might as well be us. Why should the high cost of living hit science fiction harder than anybody else, and keep us from really growing up? You just keep giving us that 35c and watch our smoke.—Ed.

Olive Morgan

And we're most delighted to meet you, too. That goes double for your superfine OTHER WORLDS, with which I can find no fault . . . perhaps I can: what did you do with that always-present little line "subscription per year"? Your own fault the enclosed sub for FATE doesn't come in twins. Are you kidding when you coyly ask "did you miss your copy too"? Whaddaya think?

Wonder who was kidding who when that other editor turned down Phillips' *The Miracle Of Elmer Wilde*? And who'll be wild when the raves pour in? As I'm so certain they must. Refreshing is the

word for "Elmer," a word, incidentally, sadly underworked in sf mags. I enter a one fem protest that the reading public should be so completely at the mercy of any one man's taste.

Take a big bow for a g-o-o-d mag. That goes for Malcolm Smith, too. A swell lot of illos that go hog wild and actually stick to the script — another innovation! Please promise me this wasn't just an out and'out splurge for the coming-out party; that you'll dress the gal up real purty next time, and the next time—ad infinitum?

Suggestions — Spread the snakes out a little bit. Good luck to a different mag.
Gardiner, Oregon

Yes, we accept subscriptions. See page 162 for a convenient way to subscribe. And we agree with you that no editor has a right to turn down a story like Elmer. Also, we promise that the idea of sticking to the script in the illustrations is permanent. We did slip up a bit in this issue (artist Bill Terry got too many men in diving helmets in his illustration, but it was our own confusion in informing him—you see, we had such a flood of mail from the first issue we were all excited.) More snakes this time, but not in the illustrations—so maybe you won't mind, just this once more?—Ed.

William N. Austin

It was a pleasure meeting you at the Cinvention, and it's likewise gratifying to be able to report that I enjoyed the initial issue of OTHER WORLDS, most of which I read under street lights on highways while hitch-hiking home from Cincinnati.

First of all, the title of the magazine is most appropriate insofar as the contents is concerned. "Other Worlds" indeed! And there's a persuasive aroma impregnating all of the stories, giving them an individuality collectively which, while not exactly "astounding" in quality, seems certainly superior "amazing." Then, too, there's a virility about the magazine that implies even better things for the future.

Wolf Den Book Shop,
724 Pike St.,
Seattle 1, Wash.

We're assuming you're not kidding about that "aroma" Bill, old pal. Or rather, that you are kidding. Anyway, you know what we mean. An aroma gen-

erally is a pleasant odor, whereas if you had said "smell" or "stink," we might have wondered about your enthusiasm. However, having met you in person, we know you're a straight-talking guy, and if you found any "aroma" in the stories you didn't like, we'll promise to spray some perfume around with our future efforts.—Ed.

Emory H. Mann

Already you have made another friend; probably loads of them. I like the tone of your introductory editorial. Your stories are good and varied. Especially do I approve of the insertion of at least one story that has a humorous twist to it.

Mostly I am an *Amazing Stories* fan, so you can understand my interest in Dick Shaver.

Yes, Bob, you have made a good start. Keep up the good work. The librarian in the Fitchburg library, the other day, told me science fiction is just coming into its own. There are enough magazine stories and interest developed from them to warrant science fiction in book form. They have two anthologies in the library now.

P. O. Box 102,
West Townsend, Mass.

Yes, we know about the rising popularity of science fiction—and we know of quite a few good books that are being published right now.—Ed.

Ann B. Nelson

I'm going to enjoy *OTHER WORLDS*—I can tell by the list of authors. *Personals* will be my first interest, as it is now, and I hope to meet, by mail, a few interesting penpals.

Whistle! Whistle! That cover! She can crawl around our house, anytime, and her mate too!

2702 Melbourne St.,
Houston 16, Texas

Glad you added those last few words, Ann. That snake girl crawls around our house too!—Ed.

Howard T. Bentley, RDSN-USN

I want to say that I really enjoyed the first issue of *OTHER WORLDS*, and that I welcome you to the field of science fiction.

Although I generally take Mr. Shaver with a grain of salt, I do enjoy his writ-

ing. He certainly has some original ideas, and you did well to put his story first in the November issue. I have followed Mr. Shaver's writing closely and am waiting for him to produce positive proof of what he says.

I have been an ardent fan of science fiction since the spring of 1939, and since that time I have gathered quite a collection of science fiction literature. In fact I would say that only a few collections exceed mine except maybe publishing company files and the library at congress. I am glad to see a new name in the field, and it will add more to my collection.

The Miracle Of Elmer Wilde is what I consider to be modern science fiction. Getting away from the old blood and thunder days of science fiction has been the one thing that has caused its tremendous rise in popularity the last few years.

USS Mt. McKinley AGC7,
San Diego, Calif.

Offhand, we'd say, prove the flying saucers (which *FATE* has pretty well done, at least as to their existence) and you've proved at least a part of Shaver. But personally, we think proving the caves is the toughest job of all. We're not going to try it. That's a job for our sister magazine, *FATE*. As for Elmer Wilde, we think you've hit the nail on the head. And we predict that science fiction will prove more popular than any type of fiction of the past.—Ed.

James R. Adams

Your format compares quite favorably with that of the other magazines and leaves little to be desired. In fact, in that respect, I would class this first issue of *OTHER WORLDS* above a couple—three of the well-established competitors. The trimmed edges call for an extra round of applause. You have a nice assortment of departments, nothing sensational, but especially like the *Personals* feature. A similar column was once carried by *Thrilling Wonder* and *Amazing Stories* but for some reason was dropped. Glad to see it back as a free service to fans.

The name of the publication is *OTHER WORLDS SCIENCE STORIES*, not *Sexy Tales*. I earnestly entreat you to remember that in regard to cover paintings and illustrations. As to selection of artists and authors—well, leave us not

be name-fanatics. I feel sure I echo the sentiments of a majority of readers when I say don't be afraid to use talented newcomers to the field. Others must someday replace the present giants of science fiction, for they are not physically immortal (though their names will live long after them).

I'll bet it didn't occur to you that readers, with their penchant for abbreviating mags' names, will be calling your pub OW!

922 N. Courtland Ave.,
Kokomo, Indiana

Yes, it did occur to us. And we felt it would be very appropriate, because it would aptly express the word our competitors would be using in a year or so. We'll not overdo the sex, as you can plainly see from this issue, and we will give newcomers a chance. This goes for artists (fan artists please note) as well as writers.—Ed.

Michael Varady

The first issue of OWSS was very good. Not exceptionally good, but still, better than some.

I like your policy.

Most of the stories in this issue were somewhat stereotyped. However, there was one outstanding story which'll probably start a new trend in fantascience. This is *The Miracle Of Elmer Wilde* by Rog Phillips. This'll probably make history in sf. It deserves a gold medal, and was definitely, in my opinion, first place.

I like your size, and the fact that you're willing to admit you've plenty of competitors—and what's more, don't mind naming them, which shows you're an adult-minded company. But what I like most is your title. OTHER WORLDS SCIENCE STORIES is not at all cheap and gaudy like some others I could mention.

But the cover is. It makes me retch. In comparison, one of Bergey's covers looks like it was done by Rembrandt. If you *must* have nudes, (and you won't find me dissenting) make sure they're human, and get Virgil Finlay or Margaret Brundage to paint them for you. The inside illos were okay, but not outstanding. Please do give us book-lengths. Some of us miss them.

210 S. Ave. 57,
Los Angeles 42, Calif.

Yes, we thought our title was pretty good too. We've been swing it up for years, keeping it secret, hoping somebody else wouldn't grab it before we got a chance to put it out. And we think you're right about Rog Phillips. As for nudes, we remember Margaret Brundage's work when she originally worked for Weird Tales many years ago. Sure was something, wasn't it! We'll try to get her again, to do something for us. You'll get book-lengths too.—Ed.

Tonea Hamilton

A TOAST—to a grand little magazine. I had never expected to see the day wherein I would attempt a letter to the editor of a science fiction magazine, let alone any other periodical.

I was hailed by my magazine dealer—"we have a new science fiction for you."

My comments: The size is perfect, it is compact, easy to carry anywhere. The stories—darn good, regardless of the very clever and astute Mr. Shaver, whom I shall leave to others to praise or condemn.

For years I have enjoyed reading science fiction, starting with *Astounding* and going on down the line. My only and sincere wish for OTHER WORLDS is for its continued success, that it eventually comes out once a month, and my being a "greedy" soul, that one or two more stories shall be added to the contents. Also, that the stories remain as fine as in the first issue. Please do not change the format or size—cost too much when having them bound.

665 S. Cochran,
Los Angeles 36, Calif.

Those are two things we certainly will do—give you more stories hereafter, and keep the size and format. Monthly appearance is only a matter of time, too.—Ed.

Theodore Sturgeon

Have just finished the first issue of OTHER WORLDS, and I congratulate you. You have the beginnings of a hot item there—an sf book catering to all tastes—and it should be a winner.

Fortune
350 Fifth Ave.,
New York 1, N. Y.

It will—with your stories in it!—Ed.

NEWS OF THE MONTH

Latest reports on what our readers are doing. Fan clubs, social events and personalities in the limelight.

MANY of you readers will be new to science fiction. Those of you who are will be very surprised to learn that there are thousands of boys and girls and men and women, not only here in the United States, but also in many other countries, notably Canada, Great Britain, and Australia, who proudly call themselves science fiction fans.

These stf (science fiction) fans publish what are called fanzines, which may be mimeographed, hektographed, or produced by the more professional means of photo-offset, or even typeset printing. These fanzines are individual projects. Any fan can start a fanzine of his own. Right now there are thirty or more fan publishers.

Not all active stf fans, or actifans, as they are called, need publish a fanzine. Many of the most active of actifans write short stories and articles for the already existing fanzines. If you have always wanted to write and have what you think is a darn good idea for a short science fiction or fantasy story, you can get it published in a fanzine.

In addition to the fanzines, there are fan clubs. These are of two kinds; the local group in one city or district that holds regular meetings to discuss science fiction and fantasy, many of whom publish a clubzine. And there are the fan clubs whose members are not confined to one locality, like the Fantasy Amateur Press Association, known as FAPA, the National Fantasy Fan Federation, known as NFFF, or NSF, and the Spectator Amateur Press Society, known as SAPS.

Some of these, like FAPA, have a limited membership and a waiting list. Others, like the NSF, are open to all. Fandom really has something exactly to fit your personality and desires, no matter what they are. More, it has people in it who will prove to be real friends to you.

Science fiction fandom is really something of a miracle. There is no board of directors. In fact, all you have to do to be an actifan is to BE one. You don't have to join anything to be a fan.

There is really only one thing in fandom that can be said to be an all-fandom project. That is the annual **WORLD SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTION**.

At the annual convention, fans stf authors, and all the publishers of magazines such as **OTHER WORLDS** (which fans call prozines, short for professional magazines), join together to make something really worthwhile.

The last one was held at Cincinnati, Ohio, and was called the Cinvention. It was held during the Labor Day weekend, with around three hundred fans, authors, and editors attending. Do you wonder what becomes of the original paintings and drawings that make the illustrations for this and other science fiction magazines? They are donated to the annual convention and auctioned off, covers bringing from twenty to seventy dollars as collector's items!

At the Cinvention the fans got to meet such notables as Vince Hamlin, the man who draws *Alley Oop*, Hannes Bok, the famous artist, writers such as Lester del Rey, E. E. Smith, George O. Smith, Rog Phillips, etc., well known fans such as Forrest J. Ackerman, Milton Rothman, Sam Moskowitz, etc., and dozens and dozens of really nice people who are just fans.

At the Cinvention it was voted by the fans that the next convention will be held at Portland, Oregon in 1950. There is an active and strong fan club there, called the Portland Science-Fantasy Society, or PSFS.

The PSFSers will have a high mark to aim at, because the Cincy boys and girls surpassed all previous conventions. By the way, will it be called the Porcon?

VENTURE BOOKS plans the publication, in the near future, of an original science-fiction novel called *Kinsmen Of The Dragon* by Stanley Mullen. This is to be an 85,000 word novel, priced at \$3.00, approximately 250 pages, handsomely cloth-bound. It will be announced in the pages of **OTHER WORLDS** and we predict it will be science novel sensation of the year.

OTHER WORLDS BOOK SHOP

The following specially-selected science fiction books have been picked by the editors of OTHER WORLDS for their excellence, and they are now available to our readers through our new book service. You can buy them directly from OTHER WORLDS. Use the handy coupon.

1. **WHO GOES THERE?** By *John W. Campbell*. These are the sensational stories by the famous editor of *Astounding Science Fiction* that shook the science fiction world. In addition to the title story, the book contains six others, including such classics as *Blindness*, *Elimination*, *Twilight* and the famous *Night*. \$3.00
2. **THE WORLD BELOW** By *S. Fowler Wright*. England's greatest science fiction novel, a story of the world a half-million years from now. \$3.50
3. **SIDEWISE IN TIME** By *Murray Leinster*. A collection of *Post* writer Leinster's most vivid stories, including *Proxima Centauri*, a tale of interplanetary adventure; *A Logic Named Joe*, a super-calculating machine gone delightfully berserk; *The Fourth Dimensional Demonstrator*; and *De Profundis*, sea serpents who doubt the existence of man. \$3.00
4. **SLAVES OF SLEEP** By *L. Ron Hubbard*. About Jan Palmer, who lives in two worlds, one while he sleeps—a strange world parallel to our own where magic holds sway and demons rule ensorcelled humans. \$3.00
5. **EDISON'S CONQUEST OF MARS** By *Garrett P. Serviss*. A smashing tale of an invasion from Mars, and the gallant counter invasion by Earthmen. The best novel from the pen of the immortal Serviss. \$3.50
6. **THE WHEELS OF IF** By *L. Sprague DeCamp*. The "laugh man" of science fiction tells his most rib-tickling science stories, including *The Gnarly Man*, an immortal Neanderthal pursued by a man-crazy female anthropologist and a glory-mad surgeon; *The Warrior Race*, conquest bent, and instead seduced by a wanton world; and many others. \$3.00

OTHER WORLDS

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PERSONALS

Jack Irwin, Box 3, Tyro, Kan. has back issues of sf and fantasy mags for sale . . . Ronald Friedman, 1980 W. 8th St., Brooklyn 23, N. Y. has a science fiction club. Local readers may be interested in joining . . . Albert Hernhuter, 3035 Chesapeake Ave., Los Angeles 16, Cal. wants science fiction readers in the southwest part of LA in their teens to contact him . . . Charles Baird, 161 Albemarle St., Springfield, Mass., suggests a back issue clearing house, conducted by fans, to collect and resell back issues, to cut the cost of back issues down . . . Peter Eklund, 861 Rhode Island, Gary, Ind. has back issues for sale . . . David Pace Wigransky, 1409 Manchester Lane, NW, Washington 11, D. C., wishes to obtain fantastic comic magazines published during 1938 to 1942 . . . Richard Elsberry, 413 East 18th St., Minneapolis, Minn., Tel. BR1814, wishes to contact teenage sf fans in Minneapolis, also would like issues of ASF before 1945 . . . J. Samuel Scabula, 743 Indiana Ave., Glassport, Pa. has back issues of AS, FA and FN and others for sale . . . Mary Karch, Lakeview, O. wants penpals and will exchange back issues of OW for FATE . . . Charles Baird (see address above) wants copies of Tales of Wonder, Cosmic Stories, Stirring and Science Fiction Quarterly, any Comet except Vol. 1 No. 2, any Capt. Future except Vol. Nos. 1 and 2, Vol. 2 No. 1 of FN. Also trade current American mags for British and Canadian . . . Garland M. Roberts, 2615 W. Cary St., Richmond 20, Va., wants to hear from Shaver fans, particularly from Va. . . Arvid Denker, Box 82, Sinclair, Wyo. wants correspondents who read OW . . . Arthur Tate, 917 Park Ave., St. Louis, Mo., wants partner with 20 reams of paper and two packages of stencils for his next fanzine. Will supply partner 500 copies issue 2 if half of needed supplies are provided . . . Daniel K. Tillmanns, 2721 Wilshire Blvd., Santa Monica, Cal. wants back issues sf mags, LA area only . . . Loren Benson, 5418 Cabanne Ave., St. Louis 12, Mo., wants to organize an sf club in St. Louis. Also wants penpals . . . E. Wood, 31 N. Aberdeen, Chicago 7, Ill., has back issues for sale or trade. Has second issue FATE . . . Robert G. Rumer, 630 W. Chew St.,

Phila. 20, Pa., has old issues of AS, ASF, Fantasy Reader, FFM and FN, all in excellent condition. Also many SF books . . . Robert Silverberg, 760 Montgomery St., Brooklyn 13, N. Y., will trade 6 copies of Stamps Magazine for every promag you send, 3 copies for every fanmag, 10 copies for every promag with six cents return postage. Would also like to correspond with teenagers regarding an organization similar to FAPA but limited to teenagers. Write for particulars . . . Jim Leary, 4718 Forest Hills Road, Rockford, Ill. has a general fan magazine with fiction, articles, etc. called Alien Culture, 15c per copy, 4 for 50c . . . James Lewis, 2970 Butler St., E. Elmhurst, N. Y. wants to secure, by trade, the November issue FATE, Oct. '47 AS, issue of AS, 1948, in which "The Brain" appears . . . Wanted, stories by Henry Kuttner, Lewis Padgett, Dr. David H. Keller, William Shiras, Murray Leinster, for consideration by OTHER WORLDS for possible publication . . . wanted, addresses of Virgil Finlay, Hannes Bok, Lawrence, Frank R. Paul, and other artists interested in illustrating stories for OTHER WORLDS . . . wanted, more requests for personals in this column, from readers. Why not get in on the fun, find yourself penpals, get business partners, trade and sell and buy back issues of all sf magazines, start fan clubs, join fan clubs, advertise your fanzines, and so on? . . . wanted, any newspaper clippings on flying saucers, Fortean phenomena of any kind. Address them to Editor, OTHER WORLDS, Clark Publishing Co., 1144 Ashland Avenue, Evanston, Ill. . . . For sale, hand-somely bound copies of the first four issues of FATE magazine, Vol. 1, 496 pages, \$4.00 each. Address FATE, Clark Publishing Co., 1144 Ashland Ave., Evanston, Ill. . . . for sale, out of print mystic books. Write for catalogue . . . wanted, copies of The New Adam, published by Ziff-Davis, and Dawn of Flame, published by Conrad H. Ruppert. Write Dept. FD, Clark Publishing Company, 1144 Ashland Ave., Evanston, Ill. . . . remember, this column is for readers who wish to advertise for penpals or sell steam engines, provided they are not business ads.

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Due to the unexpected demand for OTHER WORLDS at the newsstands, and its increasing popularity, we are unable to anticipate local needs, and therefore many stands receive insufficient copies. You may not get future issues if you get there late. And we will be unable to get enough returns to supply mail orders for back issues. Most frequent request we receive is for the first issue, from readers who missed buying one at the newsstands because they were all sold out. We can fill a few of these orders, but before very long even our office supply of the first issue will be exhausted. For a short time, you can order it as a part of your subscription. We do not guarantee that you will receive it, since they are selling fast; but if we are out of stock, we will adjust your subscription to include additional issues. The magazine you are now reading is number two.

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Now that you've read the first issue of *OTHER WORLDS*, you don't want to miss any of the following issues. Just to give you a hint of the treats in store for you, we'll list a few of them.

1. THE GAMIN

By Peter Dexter. She was a daughter of the atom war, and she lived underground where all people went when the radioactivity came. Her's was a story that will chill you with its terror, and thrill you with its heroism.

2. PROJECT PILWEE

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